MARTIN PERETZ ON THOMAS FRIEDMAN'S MIDDLE EAST

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THE NEW REPUBLIC

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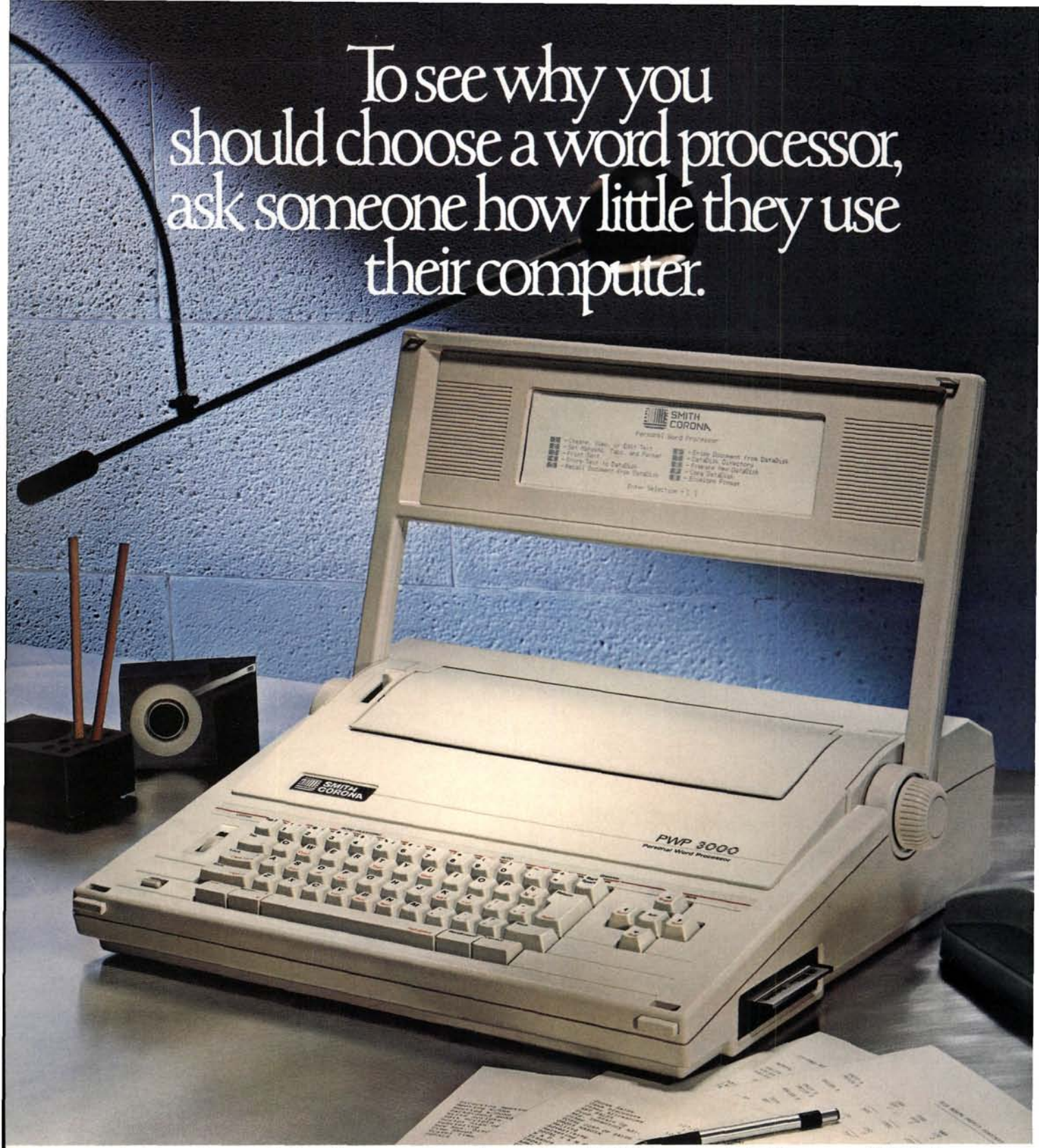

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SEPTEMBER 4, 1989

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TRB FROM WASHINGTON

Fractured Gospel

Almost no one is honest about affirmative action. Liberals cling to the insistence that minority preference is somehow different from reverse discrimination and that percentage "goals" aren't really quotas. But conservatives also have their own cherished denials of the obvious.

Two weeks ago TNR ran a short Notebook item making the obvious point that William Lucas, President Bush's failed nominee to be assistant attorney general for civil rights, was selected in large part because he is black. Lucas thus was the beneficiary of reverse discrimination. (The Senate Judiciary Committee shot down the nomination and Bush appointed Lucas to a lesser Justice Department post not requiring Senate confirmation.)

This mundane observation elicited a hysterical—in both senses—response from the editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal*. In a string of editorials the *Journal* made a great cause of the Lucas nomination, accusing "the liberal plantation" (that's Congress) of stomping on an uppity black man who doesn't toe the party line. Lucas "does not promise quotas or reverse discrimination; he promises no discrimination," said the *Journal*.

But didn't Lucas's own nomination violate this alleged principle? Oh no, no, no, the *Journal* explained (August 14). "We'd like to help our neoliberal friends get clear in their minds":

> We oppose coerced affirmative action; we oppose quotas, numerical goals, timetables. . . . [W]e do not and never have opposed affirmative action voluntarily practiced. It is perfectly appropriate for a President, university deans, and private employers to go out of their way to find black and other minority job candidates.

Sorry, but I'm still a bit unclear in my mind. It now seems that reverse discrimination is OK after all, provided that it is "voluntary" and not "coerced" by the government. But even "voluntary" affirmative action is not "voluntary" at all for the person it really affects. Unlike the *Wall Street Journal*, a white male who loses a job because of his race will not take much comfort that his would-be employer screwed him voluntarily. Furthermore, in the case of a job as assistant attorney general for civil rights, the employer *is* the government. When President Bush appoints a black man because of his race, he is coercing the taxpayers into an act of racial discrimination, just as he would be if he chose a white for racial reasons.

I thought the conservative position was that the law and the Constitution are supposed to be "colorblind." (Indeed, "The Colorblind Vision" was the magisterial title of an earlier *Journal* sermon on this subject.) But the Civil Rights Act clearly forbids public and private employers to "voluntarily . . . go out of their way" to discriminate against black people. The Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments are generally interpreted to impose a similar constitutional duty on government officials. The *Journal* claims to believe in the Civil Rights Act of 1964—in its "original meaning," of course, before affirmative action. So do most conservatives, although many, including President Bush, opposed it at the time. Is the *Journal* now saying that the Civil Rights Act does *not* apply equally to discrimination against white people, that the law is *not* colorblind? That—perhaps—it's not quite so simple? If so, this is quite a concession.

As it happens, that was precisely the issue in one of this year's big Supreme Court cases, *Richmond* v. *Croson*, which held that the city of Richmond could *not* "voluntarily" reserve 30 percent of its public works contracts for minority firms. The *Journal* applauded this decision, quoting with approval from Justice Scalia: it would be "fatal to a nation such as ours . . . to judge men and women on the basis of . . . the color of their skin." A fine sentiment, but where does that leave Mr. Lucas, who also endorsed both the sentiment and the ruling? (There is a technical argument that the federal government has more scope for reverse discrimination than the states, but I would not insult the *Journal* by supposing that its grandiose rhetoric rests on such a pinpoint of logic.)

Is it massive quotas that offend the *Journal*'s principles, as opposed to individual acts of reverse discrimination? It makes no difference—either in principle or to the victim—if he is alone or part of a group. Nor does it matter if the racial preference was only a "factor" or a hard-and-fast rule: if race or sex is a "factor" it will sometimes be the determining factor. It clearly was with Lucas: a white man with his exact qualifications (apart from race) would never in a million years have been offered the job.

When the *Journal* says it doesn't mind if employers "go out of their way to find . . . minority job candidates," it seems to be seeking refuge in the old "recruitment and training" dodge. This holds that special searches and remedial help for minorities are permissible as long as the hiring decision itself is race-neutral. (Lucas, for example, appeared to know almost nothing about civil rights law, but promised to study hard and catch up.) But for any job (even assistant attorney general for civil rights) there are also potentially qualified whites who could benefit equally from "recruitment and training." Special efforts of this sort for blacks are reverse discrimination against them.

So if it was permissible for President Bush to take William Lucas's race into account, what is left of the alleged colorblind principle? Answer: very little. The *Journal* (which I dwell on because it states a widespread view so clearly—and also because it's so much fun to poke at) actually concedes the two best arguments for reverse discrimination. First is that "in many cases . . . the black experience in itself adds a unique qualification." That certainly is true in the case of an assistant attorney general for civil rights. Second is rough justice, helping victims of past overt discrimination to "make up for lost time."

(A third argument was outlined in this space a couple of months ago by Hendrik Hertzberg: that we need to force-feed a black middle class for one generation so that its children can avail themselves of "equal opportunity" in the traditional American fashion. To me it's a bit hard to justify the costs to individuals of reverse discrimination on the basis of this kind of speculative social engineering.)

The problems with affirmative action are less in principle than in practice. It stirs understandable resentments. It stigmatizes people who would have made it without any special help. If it leads to the hiring of unqualified people (which it sometimes does), it carries an economic cost. As presently administered, it is often a bureaucratic and litigation nightmare. Government contract set-asides and other forms of preferential treatment for minority businesses are simply stupid—affirmative action for the affluent—and an open invitation to corruption.

It would be good to get the affirmative action debate off the theological plane and onto some of these practical questions. But I suppose that will have to wait until the *Wall Street Journal* sorts out its theology. •

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CORRESPONDENCE

Different Wounds

To the editors:
Hendrik Hertzberg (TRB, "Wounds of Race," July 10) says he has "yet to meet a well-informed, unbigoted black American" who would not agree that, to achieve the same degree of success as a white person, a black must be "twice as good . . . twice as talented, twice as ambitious, twice as determined." How quickly he forgets! We've met more than once, and in the course of our encounters never did I confirm, and often did I contradict, the sentiments he ascribes to all "well-informed, unbigoted" blacks. I can only conclude that my earnest denunciations of affirmative action failed to register as the legitimate sentiments of a black intellectual. These ideas, coming from me, must not have sounded "black." Perhaps he simply dismissed my opinions as a sickeningly familiar neoconservatism in blackface. I guess until it fits the agenda of white liberals, a political sentiment can't be imbued by him with the awesome "moral authority" of having issued from "informed and unbigoted" victims of the ravages of slavery.

Here's some advice for Hertzberg: Quit "trying to imagine what it's like for a black person" to experience contemporary American political culture. He can't—his partisanship gets in the way. Did it ever occur to him that for many "real" blacks it is far more infuriating to be told by a white liberal like him what they "must feel" than to listen to a hyphenated white American celebrate the immigrant origins of this country? I, having risen from a Chicago ghetto to a tenured post at Harvard, most emphatically *do not feel excluded* from the "land of opportunity" tenet of America's civil religion. Got it? And millions of blacks, of West Indian stock, did indeed descend from immigrants who came here seeking freedom. Must my participation in the national enterprise be made hostage to Hertzberg's anachronistic need for a victim class whose inevitable alienation proves the bankruptcy of American ideals?

He should tell his own story if he wants to speak about alienation from contemporary political ideals. Frankly, I can't imagine what it must feel like to still be clinging to a left-Democrat vision in post-Reagan, post-Dukakis America.

GLENN C. LOURY
Cambridge, Massachusetts

To the editors:
In the name of racial justice, affirmative action has promoted racial balkanization and South Africa-style casuistry as to who belongs to what sanctioned minority. The recent case of the two Murphy brothers in Boston—white-looking firefighters hired under an affirmative action program because they claimed a black grandmother—is but one example. Other groups whose claim of historic injustice are clearly less compelling than those of blacks have piggy-backed onto affirmative action as the easiest way to the national trough. But what is most distressing about affirmative action in its present form is that the treatments will never end. Hendrik Hertzberg claims that the present generation must be treated so that the next one can be cured. Yet the first federal programs—government set-asides for minority contractors—were instituted almost a generation ago in 1969, and none of the participants shows any sign of giving them up. What happens after the Birmingham fire department reaches its correct number of minority employees and then, through attrition or whatever, slips below that number? Will an affirmative action program be necessary again? And again?

DANIEL HARRISON
Rochester, New York

Domestic Discontent

To the editors:
Robert Reich states that Honda sends about 50,000 cars to Asia from its American factories ("Members Only," June 26). Last year Honda shipped 9,025 cars to Asia, and this year's shipments are running at an annual rate of less than 12,000. More to the point for the Detroit auto makers, Reich claims that American-made parts constitute a smaller proportion of Big Three top models than they do of Honda's top-of-the-line cars. Chrysler, for one, has 92 percent American parts in its domestic cars. Honda may be aiming for more American content just as it may be aiming for shipments of 50,000 cars to Asia, but those are goals, not facts.

BARON K. BATES
Chrysler Corporation
New York, New York

To the editors:
Robert Reich claims that Motorola designs and manufactures its cellular phones in Malaysia. The statement is wrong. Motorola's cellular phones are designed and manufactured in Arlington Heights, Illinois, in one of the most advanced, high-quality, cost-effective plants in the world. Motorola is but one of many U.S. companies who can and do design and manufacture quality electronics products here at home, only to find themselves systematically denied equal access to the second largest market in the world.

JAMES P. CAILE
Motorola, Inc.
Arlington Heights, Illinois

To the editors:
Robert Reich overlooks the fact that Thomson Consumer Electronics, whose RCA and GE brands account for the largest share of the American television market, manufactures its color TV receivers in this country. We are also deeply involved in high-definition television R&D and product design at the Princeton, New Jersey-based David Sarnoff Research Center and at our headquarters in Indianapolis.

D. JOSEPH DONAHUE
Thomson Consumer Electronics, Inc.
Washington, D.C.

Robert Reich replies:
Mr. Bates's figure for Chrysler's American content pertains only to Chrysler's "domestic" cars. But Chrysler also imports many of the cars it sells in the United States, which significantly lowers its average American content. And as Ford is now proving in its cynical effort to qualify some of its gas-guzzlers as "imports" so that their fuel-economy ratings can be averaged in with Ford's fuel-efficient imports to meet EPA requirements, the line between "domestic" and "foreign" cars is more of convenience than necessity.

As Mr. Caile says, Motorola does design and manufacture cellular telephones in Illinois. But he fails to acknowledge a fact that is of public record in Motorola's own SEC filings: it *also* makes its cellular phones in Malaysia. Nor does he contest my observation that some Asian-owned cellular phones are made by workers in the U.S. Hence my point that nationality of ownership is coming to have little bearing on which nation's workers do what—which Mr. Donahue, from Thomson S.A. (a.k.a. RCA and GE), understands.

Culture Club

To the editors:
James Q. Wilson and John J. DiIulio Jr. do not believe the drug problem will be corrected by taking any cultural measures, yet they continually point to cultural problems that contribute to the present dilemma ("Crackdown," July 10). In a culture principled by "Miami Vice" sociality, Ramboesque politics, and a Wall Street mentality, is it any wonder that today's drug of choice is a "stimulant," that its addicts are prone to "acts of violence and daring," and that crack is "marketed by a competitive distribution

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THE NEW REPUBLIC
SEPTEMBER 4, 1989

DON'T B-2 SURE

The B-2 stealth bomber may deserve a place in the annals of postmodern design. The plane is almost campily futuristic (many have noted the resemblance to Batman's Bat-plane), and it melds starkly incongruous motifs: it is hyper-svelte when viewed from front or rear, but from above or below its silhouette is all saw-toothed angularity. This is no mere strategic bomber. It is an aesthetic achievement of merit and perhaps even some sort of ironic comment on the nature of modern war.

Unfortunately, the irony doesn't end there. At half a billion dollars per plane, the B-2 has become a caustic comment on the price of modern weapons. And in straining to justify this cost, the plane's backers have resorted to arguments that border on a parody of Pentagonthink.

At its conception nearly a decade ago, the B-2 was billed as the ultimate penetrating bomber. Unlike the B-52, which is baldly apparent to radar, and the B-1, which is only mildly stealthy, the B-2 supposedly can fly almost anywhere, including Moscow, with little chance of detection. Backers said this would ensure the strength of the air-based leg of the nuclear triad. Even if the Soviets thought they could neutralize all American land-based and sea-based missiles, and destroy every incoming airplane they could find, the B-2, which they couldn't hope to find, would deter them from a first strike.

Sounds great. But the air-based leg of our triad is already secure. Although neither the B-52 nor the B-1 can assuredly reach Moscow, they don't need to, because modern bombers don't have to drop bombs. They can just release cruise missiles, which fly on their own guidance. Air-launched cruise missiles, which evade radar about as surely as any stealth airplane, can cover 1,500 miles. So a B-52 can destroy Moscow without entering Soviet airspace. (The B-1, though now considered a penetrating bomber, could be retooled for cruise missiles.)

Stealth enthusiasts argue that the ever-denser deployment of Soviet AWAC-style planes will eventually amount to an airtight surveillance envelope extending as much as 1,000 miles beyond the border. But the advanced cruise missile, now being developed for the mid-1990s, will travel around 2,500 miles. And as for fears that Soviet radar will soon be able to detect cruise missiles: the advanced cruise will employ the same sort of technology that renders the B-2 almost invisible.

The advanced cruise—which has had developmental problems, but none that seem fatal—embodies a basic trend of warfare: people can stay farther from the action, since more of the guiding intelligence is built into the weapons. In the case of bombers, this trend has so simplified the task for humans and their vehicles that there has been serious talk of refitting old Boeing 747s to fire cruise missiles.

Confronted with the declining significance of old-fashioned gravity bombs, the B-2's backers have scurried to find additional rationales for the plane. For example: a manned penetrating bomber, it is said, can best destroy a hardened missile silo or a mobile missile. This claim is highly dubious. Our land-based MX missiles can also destroy hardened silos, as can the submarine-launched D-5 missile now in testing, and it's far from clear that the B-2 can do a better job (to say nothing of a cheaper one). And even the Pentagon now admits that the B-2's ability to hit mobile missiles is doubtful.

All of this leaves aside the question of why we'd *want* to hit Soviet missiles. At the core of U.S. strategic doctrine has long been sheer deterrence: our nuclear forces should, first and foremost, ensure that no sane leader would attack the West for fear of getting his country annihilated. Yes, some argue that credible deterrence requires us to threaten subtler nuclear strikes ("counterforce"): taking out hundreds of Soviet missile silos, for example. But the logic here has always been fuzzy, and the Pentagon's relentless flacking of the B-2 hasn't done much to clarify it.

Still more puzzling is why we'd want to hit *mobile* missiles. The symmetrical possession of mobile missiles is generally considered stabilizing; their invulnerability to first strike, the logic goes, keeps both sides from contemplating a first strike and from fearing one. You can imagine situations, half-way into a nuclear war, when it would be nice to destroy mobile missiles. But

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would that capability reduce the chances of the war's starting? And if it did, would this compensate for the arguably destabilizing effect of the B-2's rendering mobile missiles (ever so slightly) more vulnerable to a *first* strike? And would that compensation be worth $70 billion? There are no signs that such questions have gotten much attention in the Pentagon.

Another example of Pentagon obfuscation is the claim that, unlike a cruise missile fired from afar, the B-2 can be "called back" at the last minute. This is a corruption of strategic discourse. When strategists say the virtue of a bomber is its ability to be "called back," they typically mean you can get your plane off the ground, and thus beyond the reach of Soviet missiles and bombs, without committing yourself to attack. This is a rational, and potentially stabilizing, posture to adopt during a crisis. But non-penetrating bombers—a cruise-missile-armed B-52, say—give you this option as surely as penetrating bombers. To be sure, since cruise missiles take a few hours to hit their targets, a B-52 wouldn't permit the retraction of an attack order only minutes before actual detonation. And people in the Pentagon are good at dreaming up reasons they'd want to do that. But none of these reasons has a plausible link to deterrence. For purposes of deterrence, all that matters is that there are American bombers out there somewhere, beyond Soviet reach, that can layer the landscape with mushroom clouds. That's why the air-based leg of the triad will retain its unique virtues even if it delivers only missiles, like the other two legs.

The most interesting argument for the B-2 has to do with conventional warfare—using it for isolated surgical strikes. According to the Air Force, the Libya air strike of 1986, which involved 84 combat planes, could have been done with three B-2s and a few fuel tankers, all based in the United States. If this is true—if the B-2 is so stealthy that even fighter escorts could be forgone without fear of giving the Libyans a twisted treasure chest of high technology—then the B-2 would indeed be a nice weapon for the sort of solo strike that could come in handy in the less bipolar world that appears to be dawning. It is hardly the only candidate; the Air Force already has a stealth fighter with ground-attack capabilities, though limited range (the F-117A). And the Navy has a carrier-based stealth plane (the A-12) coming on line soon. Still, the B-2's combination of precision and range is attractive.

But if that's all we're going to use B-2s for, we already have enough of them: two. And pulling the plug now would still leave us with the 13 planes for which spending has been authorized. Even if the world becomes a much more chaotic place—in which the United States pulls off, say, a couple of surgical strikes a year—13 B-2s will be plenty. And if the world becomes utterly chaotic—featuring, even, a sustained conventional war—we can build more B-2s.

The last-ditch argument for the B-2 is that it would help the United States exploit a loophole in the anticipated START (Strategic Arms Reduction Talks). Under START, an entire plane full of old-fashioned gravity bombs (a B-2, say) counts as only a single warhead, whereas a plane carrying 15 cruise missiles (a refitted B-52, say) counts as 15 warheads. U.S. negotiators insisted on this loophole, the argument goes, so now we have to use it as planned, so that we'll have 2,000 more warheads than the Soviets. And why do we need more warheads? Because the Soviet Union is bigger and has more targets, say Air Force generals. Well, yes. But it's unlikely that a Soviet leader is going to launch a nuclear attack, secure in the knowledge that some Siberian outpost will absorb one warhead instead of two. And deterrence is supposed to be the whole point of the exercise.

The crowning bit of Pentagon sophistry is an accounting paradox. The B-2's backers say that, since we've already spent half the $70 billion, it's a little late to cancel the program. Yet in looking at the cost of each plane, they want to talk about the "fly-away cost," which means counting only the production money, not the $35 billion already spent on research and development. Their reasoning: the benefits of stealth R&D are diffuse, and will appear in all sorts of future weaponry—fighter planes, cruise missiles, etc. So it would be unfair to burden the B-2's balance sheets with all the costs. This may be true. If so, the money will have been well spent even if we stop the B-2 assembly line after it's turned out 13 planes. That's our suggestion.

NOTEBOOK

THAT ABOUT COVERS IT:

> **20/20 (CC). With reports on defective cruise missile guidance systems and unnecessary hysterectomies, and an interview with Michael J. Fox (Channel 7 at 10).**

—television listing, *Washington Post*, August 11

FOUR LEGS GOOD, TWO LEGS BETTER: Our enthusiasm for the growing freedom for ethnic nationalism in the Soviet Union was dampened a bit by news (in the *New York Times*, August 11) that the latest expression of the liberal spirit in Estonia is a ban on strikes. The newly liberated Estonian parliament passed a law denying the vote to recent arrivals (less than five years), effectively disfranchising up to 150,000 members of Estonia's Russian minority. Russian workers went on strike, Estonia banned strikes. Haven't we been here before?

HAMMER AND SICKBED: In 1976 Dr. Armand Hammer pleaded guilty to making illegal campaign contributions to Richard Nixon in 1972. He appeared in court in a wheelchair surrounded by doctors, and his lawyers led the judge to believe that Hammer (78 at the time) was dying of heart disease. He got a trivial suspended sen-

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tence and fine, and immediately staged a miraculous recovery. Now President Bush has given Hammer a presidential pardon. This is especially inappropriate since Hammer—far from showing any remorse—has insisted on his total innocence since the moment he got off the legal hook. Maybe the old phony convinced Bush that this time he really *is* dying. Promises, promises.

QUAYLE GROWTH WATCH: "Vice President Dan Quayle has suffered the slings and arrows of a relentless media assault and not only has survived but is winning growing respect for his tenacity and political acumen."
—Donald Lambro, *Washington Times*, August 10
(thanks to Will Saletan, Washington, D.C.)

BACK TROUBLES:

'No Going Back' on Battle Against Israel, Arafat Says

—*Los Angeles Times*, August 4

Arafat to Continue Diplomatic Effort in Mideast
The leader says 'There is no going back.'
—*New York Times*, same day
(thanks to Stanley Sheinbaum, Los Angeles, California, and Henry Fetter, New York, New York)

A GERM OF TRUTH:

West German Economy Is Building Up Steam
OECD Lifts GNP Forecast to 3.25%
—*International Herald Tribune*, August 1

West German Economy Will Cool in 1990, With GNP Growth of 2.75%, OECD Predicts
—*Wall Street Journal/Europe*, same day
(thanks to Edmund Tiryakian, Zurich, Switzerland)

WHITE HOUSE WATCH

PATRIOTS AND TRADERS

By Fred Barnes

President Bush hasn't proclaimed it, but he's got a new trade policy that is substantially different from Ronald Reagan's. No, it isn't protectionism (though that's what it could lead to). It's not exactly free trade either (though that's what Bush pays lip service to). The new policy consists of beating up on trading partners—particularly Japan—in a way that may prompt them to eliminate trade barriers and thereby reduce our trade deficit. That's the substance part, and it probably won't work. There's also a political part, and it's already working. Bush wants to grab trade policy-making from Congress and bring it back to the White House, and he wants to deny Democrats the trade issue.

Arriving at the new policy hasn't been easy. On trade more than any other issue, the administration is split. The White House staff is divided. Bush himself is torn. At least I can't figure out where he personally stands. In policy debates, he normally waits for a consensus to develop among his advisers. Sometimes that doesn't happen. When disagreement continued over extending the quota on steel imports, John Sununu, the White House chief of staff, ordered Roger Porter, Bush's domestic policy adviser, to draft a compromise. Bush went along. The result is protection of the steel industry, which is thriving and doesn't need the help, for another two-and-a-half years.

The leading proponents of the new policy are Commerce Secretary Robert Mosbacher, Bush's pal from Houston, and Special Trade Representative Carla Hills. They are eager to use whatever tools are available, especially the so-called "super 301" provision of the 1988 trade act, to open markets in other countries or ensure "fair" competition. In their view, even protectionist measures like the steel quota are fine if the goal is free trade. "This whole idea of unilateral free trade works just about as well as unilateral disarmament," says Mosbacher. He and Hills have an important ally in the White House, Sununu. The new policy is also being pushed by three former congressional aides, Susan Schwab at Commerce and Rufus Yerxa and Josh Bolton at the trade rep's office. None of them liked Reagan's trade policy.

The free traders are led by budget director Richard Darman and Michael Boskin, the chairman of Bush's Council of Economic Advisers. Their allies include Vice President Dan Quayle, Secretary of State James Baker (usually), Defense Secretary Richard Cheney, and Brent Scowcroft, the national security adviser. Where's Treasury Secretary Nicholas Brady? He's often a mystery figure. He never did offer an opinion on naming Japan (under super 301) as an unfair trading partner. Had he joined the free traders and opposed citing Japan, Bush might have taken that position.

Bush has made five big trade decisions. On four of them, he did what Reagan wouldn't have. Bush zinged the European Economic Community, Korea, and Japan for not opening their telecommunications markets as widely as the United States wants. He reopened a deal the Reagan administration thought it had settled on building the FSX fighter plane with Japan, to get America a bigger chunk of the development. Bush cited Japan, Brazil, and India under super 301. And he came up with something called the structural impediments initiative, or SII, aimed at Japan's distribution system, pricing system, etc. This percolated up during Reagan's tenure, and went nowhere. But Reagan probably would have ex-

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tended the steel industry's protection with a new "voluntary restraint agreement" limiting imports. (It's actually involuntary. There's a rule of thumb in trade agreement: whenever the word "voluntary" is used, it means the opposite.) Reagan instituted the first one in 1984, after all.

"Reagan is a free trader philosophically, Bush is a free trader intellectually," says an official who's worked for both. Reagan adopted some protectionist positions—on autos, motorcycles, sugar, steel. "But he was genuinely pro-free trade," says another Reagan-Bush aide. "His move away was to protect against a greater evil, uncontrolled protectionism by Congress." Bush doesn't feel that strongly. "The biggest change is the pragmatism of this administration," says a Commerce official. "Reagan felt the less government is involved in trade, the better. This administration acknowledges there's a role for government in trade." Reagan responded only to enormous pressure. Bush responds to small amounts of pressure. He could have relieved the political pressure to bash Japan by either citing Japan as an unfair trading partner or demanding talks with Japanese officials on "structural" bars to American imports. He did both.

Mosbacher is no expert on trade issues, but he has Bush's ear. At the last minute he sent a handwritten note to the president that persuaded him to add a provision to his steel order. It requires countries to end what Mosbacher calls "unfair trade practices" if they want to export more steel to the United States. Other officials fear this might delay the termination of steel's favored status past 1992. Mosbacher is enthusiastic about super 301. "It's a good tool because it helps make sure free trade works both ways, a two-way street," he says.

In speeches and interviews, he repeats the false analogy between unilateral free trade and unilateral disarmament. Assuming we have free trade and Japan subsidizes its exports to keep their price down, American consumers benefit. True, the Japanese market may be restricted, but that mostly hurts Japanese consumers, who can't buy at the subsidized price (which is for exports) and don't get the lower prices that competition produces. We're hardly at the mercy of Japan. We're exploiting Japan's own foolish policy. With unilateral disarmament, we would be at the mercy of militarily powerful countries like the Soviet Union. Mosbacher says, "If you let one country get way out ahead in some area and close off all the other competition, then they're free to mark up the price." He means that, if the Japanese drive competitors out of some market by artificially lowering their prices, they can then artificially raise those prices. I asked Mosbacher for an example of when such a thing has occurred. After all, televisions and VCRs, etc., keep getting cheaper. Mosbacher changed the subject. Nor could other Commerce officials provide an example.

Hills is more sophisticated. "Extracting monopoly prices" is not the chief problem, she says. If Japan is allowed to deny access to their market while pursuing predatory pricing here, the United States will be forced to "eliminate our industries one by one." Economic growth will be jeopardized, she argues, along with jobs and productivity. Hills talks a free trade game. She says that super 301, which requires the administration to make annual assessments of unfair trading practices by other countries, wasn't needed (although she signed on to including Japan on the naughty list). When she announced the extension of the steel quota, she called it the "Bush administration's steel trade liberalization program." In disclosing that Japan, Brazil, and India were being cited under super 301, she said she was identifying the administration's "trade liberalization priorities."

A cruder argument by Mosbacher and Hills persuaded Bush to cite Japan. If he hadn't gone after Japan, there'd have been a "firestorm" in Congress, Mosbacher says. "There's no doubt about it, not only Democrats but Republicans to a great extent too." The consequence: protectionist legislation. Mosbacher is right about the firestorm. Whether bad legislation would have plopped on Bush's desk is anybody's guess. So long as the economy stays out of a recession, that's unlikely to have happened. But fear of a flap with Congress was enough for Bush. He brushed aside the geopolitical argument of Darman, Scowcroft, Baker, and Quayle that now isn't the time to drive a wedge between the United States and Japan. A postwar generation of leaders is emerging in Japan, and "it's uncertain where they'll align themselves," said one of these officials. The Soviets, Chinese, and other Asians want to ally with them. The United States should make sure it's not cut out.

Bush didn't leave himself much leeway on steel. During the campaign last year, he had sent a letter to Republican Senator John Heinz of Pennsylvania promising to extend the steel quota. (Bush won Pennsylvania 51 to 49 percent.) But he didn't say how long. Labor Secretary Elizabeth Dole urged five years. Mosbacher and Hills recommended four. Darman stayed out of this one, but Boskin and Brady favored two years. More than a dozen meetings were held at the White House on the issue. No consensus was reached until Porter drafted his compromise, which extended the quota but phased it out over 30 months.

The steel decision is innocuous compared with the structural impediments initiative. SII was proposed by the Treasury Department as a "nice" alternative to naming Japan under super 301. Then it was adopted in addition to 301. It plays well in Congress, which relishes Japan-bashing. Now administration officials regard the SII talks with Japan, beginning in September, as highly significant and potentially productive. This is a pipe dream. "We're telling Japan to change its whole social system," says a skeptical White House official. The last caution was raised by Darman at a meeting of Bush's Economic Policy Council on August 11. He said the talks shouldn't distract attention from what needs to be done here: improving education, encouraging investment and saving, promoting R&D. These, plus stable exchange rates, will ease the trade deficit. Cogent as his argument was, he might as well have been talking to the wall. •

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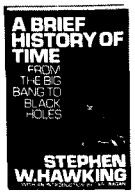

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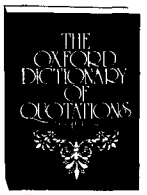

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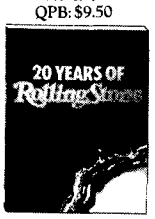

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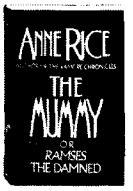

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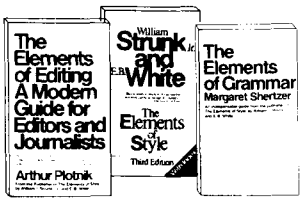

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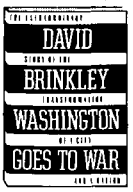

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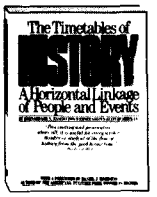

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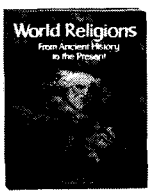

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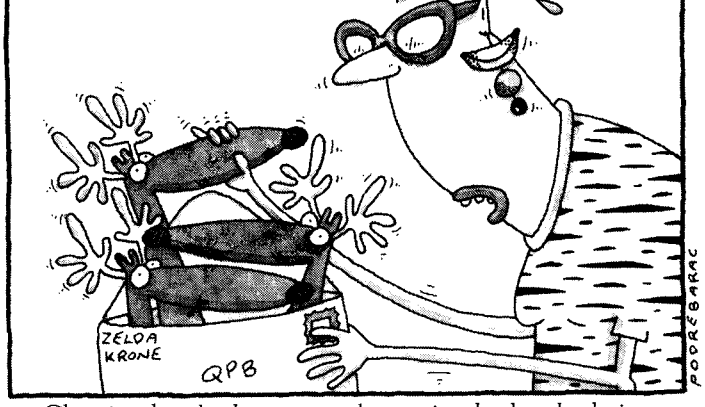

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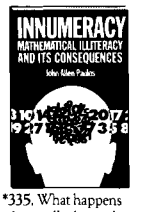

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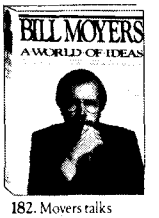

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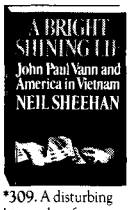

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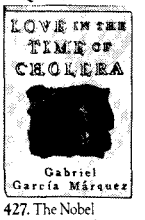

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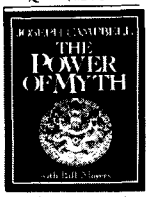

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Give the *contras* a few more months.

Look Out, Gringo

By Morton M. Kondracke

United States policy in Central America looks like a debacle well under way. Unless the Bush administration moves to change things, the Sandinistas are likely to rig elections planned for February—Noriega-style, if necessary—and then repress the opposition. As expected, international diplomacy to oust Manuel Noriega himself is not working. He continues to harass Americans in Panama and to show up the United States as a pitiful, helpless giant. Things will get worse if Congress moves toward renouncing the Panama Canal treaties; then Noriega will be seen in the region as David fighting Goliath, instead of the drug-thug he is.

Meanwhile, Congress has not yet decided to force the conservative ARENA government of El Salvador into power sharing with the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front. But if the FMLN can't be stopped from acts of urban terrorism, pressure to "end the bloodshed" on any terms will mount. And while the administration is depending upon Moscow to curtail arms flows to the region, U.S. intelligence reports indicate that only the Soviet Union has stopped sending lethal aid direct to Nicaragua. Total East bloc military supplies have not diminished. Mikhail Gorbachev perhaps has lost interest in fomenting revolution, but Fidel Castro has not.

And there's disarray among American allies and quarreling among American officials. The Central American presidents, Nicaragua's democratic opposition, and the Sandinista high command all believe that Bush has no stomach for a fight with Congress to keep the *contras* alive even as a potential fighting force, so they are cutting deals left and right. Despite Bush's last-minute pleading, the presidents adopted a plan to demobilize the *contras* by December, two months before the elections that the *contras* were supposed to keep honest. Daniel Ortega gleefully declared the agreement to be the *contras*' "death sentence."

Just before that agreement, the democratic opposition cut the best deal it could with the Sandinistas, guaranteeing that the elections will be administered by a commission stacked 4-to-1 in favor of the government and headed by the official who rigged the Sandinistas' 1984 victory. A *Miami Herald* poll conducted in July shows that a united opposition candidate would get 49 percent of the vote in a fair election, compared with 24 percent for the Sandinistas, but it's unlikely the election will be fair. Jimmy Carter will be there to observe. But then, he was present when Noriega stole the Panamanian elections. Americas Watch reports that even now the Sandinistas are terrorizing family members of *contra* fighters. What will they do when Carter goes home?

Finger-pointing has already begun. Miami-based *contra* political leaders claim, "We have two enemies to defend against: the Sandinistas and the State Department. They both want to destroy us." State says it wants these "armchair guerrillas" to go back into Nicaragua to wage political struggle along with the internal opposition. But the *contras* contend—along with some administration officials—that Secretary of State James Baker secretly wants to dismantle the *contras* in Honduras as well to get rid of a difficult domestic political problem.

Right-wingers already are accusing Baker of a "sellout" of the *contras* because he did not arm-twist the presidents of Honduras and El Salvador into delaying the *contra*-demobilization plan. (Baker aides say they tried friendly persuasion, but that Congress has undermined U.S. influence.) On August 15 representatives of 30 right-wing groups met in Washington for a grousing session. One-time Reagan State Department aide Allan Keyes brought them to their feet by telling administration officials present that they lacked any strategy for Central America and were either incompetent or had in mind "the destruction of the *contras*."

Meanwhile, columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak report policy disputes between the National Security Council and the State Department. Other sources say there is no actual disagreement between Baker and the White House, just a personality conflict between Bernard Aronson, assistant secretary of State for Latin America, and Everett Briggs, the NSC's Latin America coordinator. Friends of Aronson, a Democrat, fear he's being set up to be Baker's scapegoat if and when Central America policy fails and the right wing is looking for someone to blame.

How to get out of this mess? First, Bush and company must stop conceding that the *contras* are dead, even if they secretly believe it. One official said, "I think our experience of the last eight or nine years has shown that the American people simply will not support the *contras* in a sustained way. In the movies, they're portrayed as close to Nazis. . . . We probably could get a spurt of new aid, but what's the point? We're not screwing around on talk shows here. We're talking about sending peasant boys out to die." Even the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page, a pro-*contra* bastion, is urging that the guerrillas be offered a haven in the United States.

This may be a realistic and humane attitude, but politically it's disastrous defeatism. The administration position should be that it will keep the *contras* supplied with humanitarian aid until February, and that if the Sandinistas steal the election, it will return to Congress and ask for military aid—and let Congress hand the Sandinistas their victory, if it dares. As a fallback, Bush could say that if, by some chance, the Sandinistas should win a fair election despite an economy more decrepit than Haiti's and an inflation rate of

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20,000 percent, then the *contras* can come here.

Keeping the *contras* going through February is an option not foreclosed by the Central American presidents' agreement, which calls for "voluntary" demobilization. If the *contras* do not want to demobilize, no one is going to make them. In its bipartisan agreement with Congress earlier this year, the administration handed it the power to cut off *contra* funding this November, and Democrats may be tempted to continue aid for demobilization purposes only. Bush should fight this, on the grounds that it's in everyone's interest to keep *contra* forces intact at their bases in Honduras at least through February, to ensure a fair election. If the *contras* fear they will be defunded prematurely, several thousand fighters may decide to return to Nicaragua as guerrillas, giving the Sandinistas an excuse to cancel the election.

Next, the administration needs to make it clearer that some progress has been achieved in pushing for a democratic opening, and that international pressure (along with a viable *contra* force) might lead to a fair and winnable election. The administration has tried to unify the fractured opposition around a single candidate—presumably, *La Prensa* publisher Violeta Chamorro, potentially a Corazon Aquino-like figure. The Sandinistas have given the opposition more TV time for campaigning (though only on a Managua channel) and have said that army troops will vote at their homes, rather than under supervision at their barracks. Ortega has promised the Central American presidents that he will negotiate directly with the *contras* and will guarantee them amnesty. These concessions create opportunities, but the administration needs to follow up. Aronson has been trying to argue the point that there's hope, and Vice President Dan Quayle has been active in diplomacy, but Bush needs to be more personally involved, as does Baker.

For example, Bush and Baker should be calling on Latin American and European leaders—and House Speaker Tom Foley and Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell—to visit Nicaragua, to demand the Sandinistas live up to their election promises and to promise that they will be back again to ensure that oppositionists are not repressed. Baker did make calls, when Ortega visited Europe on a fund-raising trip in May, to make certain that he was cut off pending the outcome of the elections. Ortega reportedly complained to Costa Rica's Oscar Arias that he was looking for $250 million, but received only $20 million. Still, there's been little pressure on the Democrats to push for democracy. And when *contra* commanders visited Bush recently, the White House virtually kept it a secret.

Before the Central American presidents met, the administration should have supported El Salvador's request that the FMLN get the same treatment as the *contras*: that is, be scheduled for an internationally supervised demobilization. Salvadoran President Alfredo Cristiani reportedly feared that congressional Democrats would cut off foreign aid if he pressed this point, and so he settled for a communiqué urging that the FMLN lay down its arms.

So far, Congress has not threatened to cut off Salvadoran aid. In fact, thanks to lobbying by Quayle and Aronson, the administration unexpectedly won a recent vote granting riot control aid for Salvador's police. But a campaign surely will be launched eventually to get Congress to force a settlement on Salvador. When it happens, the administration should remind Congress that all of Salvador's neighbors (including even Ortega) now have urged the FMLN to quit its struggle.

The most difficult situation facing the United States is in Panama, where Noriega apparently plans to remain in power indefinitely. Presumably the administration is covertly plotting to oust him as well as maintaining a worldwide political campaign against him. But if he holds on, Congress surely will move to reject Noriega's nominee as Panama Canal administrator, and other resolutions will be introduced to suspend fulfillment of the treaties handing Panama control of the canal at the end of the century. Unpopular though Noriega is, U.S. reneging on the treaty would likely make him an anti-gringo hero.

The ultimate danger is that the United States will allow an anti-American axis to form in the region consisting of Cuba, Panama, Nicaragua, and a Communist El Salvador. It will do no good for Republicans to blame Democrats for letting it happen, or for right-wingers to blame moderates in the administration. If we can't get rid of Noriega anytime soon, and we surely can't get rid of Castro, then let's at least save Salvador—and win one in Nicaragua if we can.

The joy of class notes.

The Kids Are Fine

By James Atlas

Norman Mailer, in *Advertisements for Myself*, wrestled admirably with that demanding genre, the Class Note. Invited to give an account of himself on the 15th anniversary of Harvard's class of '43, he produced a memorable parody of the genre:

> We are now living in the country, and find to our surprise that we like it, although the children miss the ambiguity and partial unshelterings of a New York public school education. Suburban life is great—I find to my perhaps overstructured horror that I rather enjoy the high-pressured rubber of bridge on the evening rocket back . . .

What is it about this genre that invariably elicits prose at once so ghastly and so utterly absorbing? Like Bruce Wilson, '66, who confessed in the Summer 1988 issue of the *Putney Post* that he had "just finished reading *Putney* Class Notes cover-to-cover," I read class notes—any class notes—even more avidly than my two other favorite periodical features, the personal columns of the *New*

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York Review of Books and the Luxury Homes and Estates pages of the publication I work for. Never mind that I didn't go to Putney; my wife did, and it comes in the mail (along with *Radcliffe Quarterly* and the *Harvard Medical School Bulletin*, which I also read).

You don't have to be single to enjoy the bizarre self-advertisements of the personal columns, just as you can spend hours staring at the photographs of East Side townhouses for sale even if you can hardly afford the maintenance on your apartment. Nor does it matter if you actually know the people you're reading about in class notes. Something about the format—maybe it's not having any idea of who one's readers are—conspires to produce revelations of character that simply aren't to be found anywhere else in the literature of our time.

Not *conscious* revelations. No doubt those who volunteer their news believe they're just delivering the facts: enumerating career developments, children born, houses acquired. *Harvard Magazine*, which runs the same terse notes it's run since the form was introduced early in this century ("Carlton Appolonio, '08, is at present in the employ of the General Fire Extinguisher Company at Warren, Ohio"), tries to keep it that way. "I edit out infatuation with self," says Nancy Jackson, '64, who presides over the magazine's class notes. She cites "flat-footed irony" and a very ponderous humor as the most common vices. But even these taciturn entries admit the occasional burst of candor. "Class notes have come to be limited to announcements of marriages, promotions, awards, and other glad tidings," writes Bruce Kraus, '76, in a recent issue, "but I think the University's annals would be incomplete without mention of the dubious distinction I recently achieved, of having both married and divorced two fellow members of the class of '76. While we are not quite as close as our fifth reunion directory implied (it incorrectly listed all of us at the same address), all three of us and miscellaneous progeny are happy and well."

I'd like to know more. Clearly, Kraus needs the space provided by the *American Oxonian*, the Journal of the Association of American Rhodes Scholars, which prints the most long-winded specimens I've encountered. Its pool of contributors is small (there are only 32 members in each class), but an evening's perusal yields in the space of 20 or 30 pages the whole chronology of human life, from the nonagenarians with their tales of broken hips and failing vision to the reluctant senior citizens, willfully perky in the face of retirement (". . . still run footraces with the family poodle"); the high-powered professionals in their 50s and 60s, making feeble efforts at the height of their careers to dampen their complacency ("Perhaps the scariest thing about being a department chairman is that there are days when I really seem to enjoy it"); the vigorous family men on the cusp of middle age ("All is well with us: the children one jump ahead of their juvenile probation officers"); and finally, the youthful recent graduates, just starting out in life but already masters at walking the class note tightrope between modesty and self-delight: "In addition to weathering the sea-change from being a graduate student to being a faculty member, I'm busy renovating a not-so-beautiful house on a beautiful piece of property . . ."

Nowhere is this balance more beautifully achieved than in the class notes of the *Putney Post*. Candid, copious, and tirelessly confessional, they manage to maintain a strenuous upbeat tempo while remembering to inject faint intimations of self-doubt. Approaching 40, Bruce Wilson, '66, (the same guy who reads the *Putney Post* cover-to-cover) is determined to eschew "introspection of the where-am-I-going-how-am-I-doing-in-relation-to-my-peers-in-relation-to-my-own-ideas-Am-I-doing-the-most-that-I-can-What's-the-next-big-move class." Which doesn't prevent him from weighing in with a hefty six paragraphs of "taking stock." The laid-back Putneyites are just as compulsive about the examined life as the ambitious Oxonians. "In a nutshell," declares Nicholas Holt, '45, "unconditional love from birth on will create a creative, responsible, outgoing, and joyous person."

Politics is a big issue. How can we bring peace to Central America? asks Jethro Pettit, '77. "Give me a call if you have some ideas, or just stop by to hang out and play with legos on our living room floor." For Pettit as for most of his classmates, the emphasis is less global than cheerily domestic. Even in this progressive environment, home and career predominate. Ben Smith, '65, announces the appearance in his life of a "delightful step-son named Noah, full of oats and vinegar, who at age six commands knowledge of U.S. capitols, Tucson street names, and the ramifications of the Interstate Highway System that is almost Talmudic in breadth and subtlety." "Life has been good here in Park Slope." "Happy. Happy." "Hannah is in an alternative public school which is into things like respecting the individual . . ."

So it goes. As for me, life continues to be a fruitful and terrifying experience. The kids are a joy, even if my nearly two-year-old son still isn't sleeping through the night, which means that most days I'm in a state of the deepest imaginable fatigue; and he still throws food all over the floor. Also, I'm persistently short of cash: when the clerk in our neighborhood hardware store disappeared behind the counter last week, only a sign warning that shoplifters would be prosecuted deterred me from pocketing a small lugwrench. Still, it's a lot of fun. The other day, walking home from work on a sweltering August afternoon when everyone else was in Hamptons, I turned up our elegant, tree-lined street and thought: not bad, Atlas. Maybe that's what life is all about. (Then again, maybe it isn't.) Anyway, love to everyone I know. U.S. Out of Nicaragua. See you at the reunion. As Andy Cohen, Putney '79, put it, "Just drop me a line and have a nice day."

JAMES ATLAS is an editor at the *New York Times Magazine*.

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My controlled experiment in health care costs.

A Tale Of Two Eyes

By Lawrence Malkin

It was late on a summer night three years ago, and I had just moved into an old mill in the French countryside to write a book. I started seeing strange spots and flashing lights. Uh-oh, said my wife, and rang for the village ambulance. It took me to the government's regional hospital in Tours, where an intern had been summoned from bed. He peered deep into my right eye, saw something unusual, and told me to stay overnight.

The next morning a team of eager young residents arrived, and announced after examining me that they had discovered my lower right retina was torn. Not to worry, said the chief ophthalmologist, a *coup de laser* would mend it quickly. That afternoon I joined half a dozen others for laser surgery. With a short series of blinding flashes, the eye surgeon cauterized the area around the retinal tear. I rode home in a taxi and was back at my word processor in a few days.

The bill for the treatment came to about $75 at today's exchange rate. (The semi-private hospital room cost about $180.) When I returned a month later as an outpatient for a checkup and a second zap of the laser, it cost another $75. Incredulous, I rechecked. I got a Gallic shrug. It's the same price for everyone, *Monsieur*.

A French patient would have sent his bill to his local Social Security office, which runs the self-financing government insurance fund to which every French worker and employer contributes. Eighty percent of the charges would have been reimbursed. That's the same percentage paid by my American insurance company, the Traveler's Insurance Co., which asked me to confirm that I had been treated by a licensed physician. At that price, they probably thought I had hired a faith healer.

Because a retinal tear has to be caught quickly, I am always on the lookout for another one. After I came home to America, the characteristic pattern of spots (they remind me of the constellation of the Pleiades) appeared in my left eye while I was strolling through the National Arboretum on a Sunday. Next morning I went to my ophthalmologist, who spotted a tear, phoned the hospital to switch on the laser, and within two hours had stitched up my left retina.

The cost was $1,300 for the ophthalmologist and $256.85 for the use of the hospital's laser, most of it covered by insurance, but nevertheless ten times the cost of the same medical treatment in France. (As in France, I went back for a second look a month later but this time another zap wasn't needed.) Both countries had the same high standards of medical technique and personal attention. The two experiences had been virtually a controlled experiment. The only important difference was the price.

Laser eye surgery, less than a decade old, is to ophthalmologists what antibiotics are to other doctors: a new procedure that actually helps patients recover. Without it, the retina can detach from the eye socket. That means expensive surgery, which doesn't always prevent blindness.

Americans believe in science and technology as an article of faith. Coronary bypasses, CAT scans, and lasers save lives. But they are also costly. High-tech medicine accounts for more than half of the annual increase in our medical bills, which are going up by ten percent a year. Doctors' payments are going up 16 percent.

In France, however, lasers have actually brought *down* the price of treatment. The machines aren't cheap (each one runs about $100,000), and they are placed in France's government-run central clinics so the expense can be spread among more patients. In America any self-respecting private hospital has its own laser (and CAT scan and other sophisticated equipment). And we pay for the doctor's training and his malpractice premiums as patients rather than as taxpayers. In Europe his education costs him little or nothing, and malpractice suits are virtually unknown, in part because people still trust their (socialized) doctors. Even so, none of this accounts for such a gross disparity in price.

The most important difference lies in the way the state medical insurance fund deals with doctors. In France as in most other European countries, the administrators of the government's insurance funds have wrangled a low fee for the laser procedure, which replaces the much more difficult and time-consuming operation for a detached retina. The U.S. fee structure is based mainly on consultation between physicians and Medicare (since most laser eye surgery patients are older people). The system contrives to keep prices up, since the doctors in effect set the price, and don't pass on the savings to the public. Laser eye surgery cost Medicare $34.1 million in 1987, and the average charge allowed by the government was $787 per patient, still far more than the cost at a public clinic in France.

In every other industry, high technology has cut costs. Computers save labor on the assembly line. New metals and plastics increase quality and productivity. In medicine, our price structure rests on the myths that sustain an inefficient and expensive system. We believe that only expensive private treatment can give us "the best," especially at the cutting edge of technology. My experience proved this wrong. Many people also believe that under a state system a patient cannot choose his own doctor. In England, I've been treated for kidney stones by my own National Health Service doctor, who made a house call at 6 a.m.—a now unheard-of service in the United States. In France I had my own ophthalmologist, but when I had to depend on a clinic in an emergency, the doctors performed superbly.

Above all, we believe in competition. But a patient

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with a torn retina has no time to shop around, and even if he did, there wouldn't be much to choose from. Since few insurance companies have a large enough share of the market to enforce prices (Massachusetts Blue Cross is a rare exception), the doctors play them off against each other and keep their fees up in the name of the free market.

Congress finally is trying to do something about all this. The House Ways and Means Committee recently voted to limit what the government will pay doctors under Medicare. The proposal would have Medicare negotiate a fixed fee for laser surgery—and 7,000 other procedures. Medicare fees to doctors would be based on their real costs of training, equipment, and the time they actually spend with patients. Ophthalmologists and heart surgeons would receive less, family doctors more. The plan would also put a ceiling on total payments to doctors and claw the money back later in lower fees if the profession exceeded the target ($30.9 billion next year). Not surprisingly, the doctors are already quarreling among themselves over the limited funds.

Writing in the *Wall Street Journal*, one eye surgeon boasted of his "personal restraint" in refusing cataract surgery to a dying Alzheimer's patient aged 91. He claimed this represented the best defense against government control, as if bureaucrats in other countries would have forced him to do it. Another ophthalmologist wrote to the *New York Times*, "There is no likelihood that cost-effective, high-quality, technology-based health care systems would be developed through . . . any form of imposed governmental medicine."

Of course things can go wrong under any system, and I was lucky with my eye treatment in both countries. But when I pointed out the differences to a financial specialist at my local hospital, she snapped: "I don't want to hear about other systems in other countries." That's the problem.

LAWRENCE MALKIN, the European correspondent for *Time* from 1979 to '86, spent the last year as a guest scholar at the Brookings Institution.

WASHINGTON SCENE

MECCA BUCKS

By Alex Heard

On the night of Saturday, July 29, I leaned out my apartment window and, from the direction of the faraway Monument grounds, heard thuds that sounded like opening salvos of a tank and mortar attack. *Whump. Whump.* Trees blocked that part of the sky, but I nervously assured myself that it was fireworks, and not a pre-emptive strike from Northern Virginians maddened by low screechers flying into National Airport. The date had me confused, though. July 29 is not a big day in American history. What was up?

Eventually I found out. It was fireworks, and the half-hour display was in honor of an event that has only a slightly looser hold on America's heart than the Fourth, Memorial Day, Bird Day, or Elizabeth Cady Stanton Day: a 100,000-square-foot exhibit at the Washington Convention Center called "Saudi Arabia: Yesterday and Today." The fireworks were just one small part of a Saudi promotional war machine that laid siege to D.C. from late July to late August. In coming months it will hit Atlanta, Dallas, Los Angeles, and New York, and to residents I say: duck and cover. Here in Washington we're accustomed to unexplained blitzes of p.r. activity by foreign countries, but this one was more unexplained than any we've experienced. One day we were all walking around with our normal mindset vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia—that is, we weren't thinking about it—and the next, with a volume equaled only by pre-season media blather about the Redskins, full-page newspaper ads, magazine inserts, radio spots, and the side of every other bus ordered us to surrender to Araby's seductions. The centerpiece was the downtown exhibit hailing the perfection of Saudi culture and industry, but around it swirled a host of related events. The question that thousands are asking is: Why? Why now? Why ever?

Obviously, Saudi Arabians have as much right as anyone to spend big bucks peddling quasi-reality to Americans, but it wasn't clear what, if anything, they were after. The Saudi-U.S. "alliance" is chugging along as vaguely as ever, but the Saudis want F-15s, and in the near future it doesn't look like we'll fork any over. So the Saudis are doing more of their arms shopping in Britain and France, and informed sources on relevant Hill committees tell me this is a very slow period for Saudi lobbying. Another traditional reason for p.r. blitzes is to promote tourism, but that's out. With rare exceptions, Americans *can't* go to Saudi Arabia as tourists unless they are Muslim pilgrims en route to Mecca. We can go if we're approved businessmen or technicians who possess knowledge the Saudis want, but the glory days of that cultural exchange were in the late '70s and early '80s, before the Saudis made much progress training their own skilled industrial work force. That left option three: for some reason, the image-conscious Saudis decided this would be just the thing to get Americans to stop believing those vile rumors about Saudi women being treated badly and Saudi adulterers getting their heads lopped off in public. At which point a multi-tentacled American p.r. outfit sent a telex that said, See Us for All Your Useless Spending Needs! And that, essentially, is what happened.

The origins of the exhibit date back several years, to a smaller show called "Riyadh: Yesterday and Today,"

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which played in Germany in 1985. From there it went to France, England, and Egypt, and grew to become "Saudi Arabia: Yesterday and Today." At some point along the way, at the request of the Saudi government, the Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia's U.S. public relations firm—the Hannaford Company Inc.—started sending employees overseas to "consult" on upgrading the exhibit for an American audience.

The firm's president, Peter Hannaford, a Reagan insider from way back who was Mike Deaver's partner in the pre-administration days, says the exhibit was viewed as an effective way to spread general Saudi goodwill, and not as the start of a specific legislative drive. The Saudis aren't saying how much it cost, and unfortunately Hannaford, a crack media handler (in 1986 he wrote a snappy p.r. guidebook called *Talking Back to the Media*), easily fended off my attempt at "reverse" psychology: "I bet you're too *chicken* to tell me how much it cost!" There are rumors, however, with the amount spent so far put at somewhere between $12 million and $25 million. Those are just that—rumors—but it's easy to imagine if you've been around D.C. or opened up any magazine during the past few weeks.

All we really know is that an upgrade occurred. Chief among the improvements for our shores is the high-tech laser show, which, according to the press kit, symbolizes the "technological 'leap' from the country's traditional legacy to modern Saudi Arabia." (Among other symbolic images: a laser-etched falcon that flies in confused circles.) The set is also new. It consists of a number of huge simulated stone-and-sand landscapes made by Rathe Productions in New York—constructed in handy collapsible pieces hauled here by 75 trucks! The exhibit's splendors also include: the gold and silver doors that once stood at the entrance to the Kaabah in Mecca's Grand Mosque; traditional costumes and craftsmen; modern artwork (including a Dali rip-off depicting a man with a leaky, egglike head); manuscripts and maps; architectural models for expansion of the mosques at Mecca and Medina; life-size photomurals of Saudi citizens at home, work, and play; the Story of King Abdul Aziz, the Saudi national founder; a simulation of a traditional souk, or marketplace; male Saudi tour guides and female American tour guides in Saudi costumes (the government deemed it inappropriate for actual Saudi women to appear here, so Rathe hired area females through temporary agencies); scale models of industrial sites; much bragging about increased agricultural production; non-free foodstuffs; and a booth where a Saudi calligrapher writes YOUR NAME in Arabic.

And this was merely what met the ordinary Washingtonian's eye. As always when a p.r. juggernaut rolls into town, there were related events aplenty. These are on the record for the enjoyment of posterity, because like all lobbyists for foreign nations, Hannaford Inc. must file documents twice a year with the Justice Department that describe what the company has been doing. The pre-exhibit edition (covering the period ending May 31) provides eerie insight into what goes on in the trenches of Washington p.r. Basically, an agency calls every imaginable media outlet to suggest coverage—and when I say "every" I mean right down to "Amtrak Express" and "AAA World"—and then *really* bears down. For Hannaford there were disappointments, certainly. Willard Scott turned down an offer to broadcast the "Today Show" weather from the exhibit floor. Marion Barry turned down a free trip to the desert kingdom, as did Ed Koch and Tom Bradley, *Atlanta* magazine, *Dallas*, *Los Angeles*, and *Delta*. The Capital Classic Horse Show declined to participate in a "possible horse event." And the *Washington Post* said no to collaborative sponsorship of "children's or senior's activities."

But there were coups as well. Along with a good bit of media coverage, Vice President Dan Quayle showed up at an opening gala and spoke on the "shared family values" of our countries. President Bush walked through the exhibit and viewed the laser show, though he reportedly made the projectionist fast-forward to the closing freeze-frame showing him with King Fahd. Mayor Andrew Young of Atlanta and Mayor Annette Strauss of Dallas did take trips, as did Paula Rackow of *Pan Am Clipper*, Lee Fleming of *Museum and Arts Washington*, and a free-lancer named Vivian Barry. The National Zoo accepted an offer of Saudi critters—though these are technically "still in the mail." Garfinkel's department store held a show of creations by top Saudi fashion designer Adnan Akber. And the American Foundation for the Blind hosted Sheikh Abdullah Mohammad Al-Ghanem, a blind Saudi educator. He had a photo-op with Quayle on July 28, at which Quayle presented him with a tactile floor plan of the U.S. Capitol. All in all, a good "body count" for the professional fees Hannaford charged the Saudis during that six-month period: $277,108. (During the same time Hannaford listed $10,243,624 in expenses for the Saudi account.)

In the end I could not resist the exhibit's call. After stopping at the press office and picking up all the info I'll ever need about Saudi Arabia's methane production, I took the tour. The show had the basic mix common to all slanted bids for a level playing field: charming things (do not miss the model-train-scale mosques), half-true things (the Saudis brag about their surplus wheat production, but don't mention they're draining their underground aquifer dry to achieve it), and big lies (women don't get a lot of attention here, and "Death of a Princess" and the fact that Saudi women still aren't allowed to drive aren't discussed).

But did it have the desired effect? Yes. Several exhibit-goers talked about calling their travel agents ASAP. They're in for a jolt of rejection, and I just hope the five cityloads of people seduced by this tour send a clear message to their congressmen: we demand quid pro quo. No F-15s without SaudiRail and a Worlds of Desert Fun amusement park in Riyadh.

ALEX HEARD is a Washington writer.

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The return of private toll roads.

McHighways

By Howard Ullman

The country's highways are in terrible shape. The Federal Highway Administration still rates the conditions on over half of all non-local roads as either poor or fair, despite the $66 billion spent each year by federal, state, and local governments on maintenance, repair, and construction. Traffic has increased much faster than anyone anticipated when the interstate system was planned in the 1950s, and it is expected to double within 30 years.

Some state and local governments, reluctant to raise taxes and despairing of more money from Washington, are returning to an old idea: private toll roads. They hope to shift the burden of building new roads to the private sector, which they believe can build and operate them more cheaply. The first private toll bridge in the United States in over 40 years opened last June, linking Fargo, North Dakota, and Moorhead, Minnesota. Its owners, the Bridge Company of Fargo and the Municipal Development Corporation of New York, split the toll receipts. California recently passed a bill that permits the construction of four private toll roads. In each project, the state will lease land to a private firm for 35 years, during which the company will build, run, and maintain the road. In addition to the tolls, the firms will receive a percentage of revenues from developments along the highway.

In July Virginia gave preliminary approval for a private corporation to build the longest private highway in the country, a $146 million, 14-mile extension of a government-owned toll road that now runs from suburban Washington to Dulles Airport. (The application still awaits the final go-ahead of a state agency.) The company would own the road for 40 years and expects to get a 15 to 16 percent return on its investment, slightly more than the typical local utility company. The road company will not have the power of eminent domain, and will have to purchase some land.

The most ambitious private road project is a planned $2.5 billion, 350-mile "Heartland Autobahn" connecting Chicago and Kansas City, bypassing St. Louis, and possibly linking up with the Indiana Toll Road. A bill in the Illinois state legislature (modeled on the 1849 legislation that created the Illinois Central Railroad) would allow a firm to build and operate the toll road, which might include a mass transit system in the median, fiber optic telecommunication cables, and natural gas lines. The Federal Highway Administration has indicated it would allow the road company to set the speed limit, and state legislation would give the road company the power of eminent domain, giving it quasi-governmental authority to take land that it needs. One controversial section of the bill, like the California act, would give the company the right to a percentage of revenues generated by any developments that happen to be built near the road.

These plans all sound pretty good. But the distinction being made between public and private is not all that clear. On the one hand, most of the work on public roads already is "privatized" in the sense that the construction is contracted out. State prisoners build roads these days only in the movies. Private firms did almost all of the work on the 843,000 miles of federal-aid highways, which include interstate, primary, secondary, and urban roads—over 20 percent of the nation's total. And the interstate system, at least, is funded out of a special tax on highway users not wildly unlike a toll.

On the other hand, as the new projects indicate, even private developers need the government's power of eminent domain, use tax-free municipal bonds, etc. In some cases, the state actually will end up subsidizing the projects. In Minnesota, for example, the city of Moorhead used its bonding authority to enable the Bridge Company of Fargo to sell $1.6 million in tax-exempt bonds in 1986.

Private road enthusiasts point out that the government simply isn't spending enough to maintain the highways. True enough. The Highway Trust Fund collects revenue from user fees, most notably the nine-cent-per-gallon tax on gasoline. The government also taxes tires, truck sales, and highway truck traffic by weight. But in real terms the gas tax revenues have been declining, thanks in part to more fuel-efficient cars, and in part to Congress's timidity toward the trucking industry, which in 1984 won repeal of a higher tax on heavy trucks. What's more, the Trust Fund is currently holding $9 billion in money collected but not spent, since these revenues count as part of the federal budget (and thus the Gramm-Rudman deficit calculations) even though they are earmarked for highways. In an era where the word "tax" is verboten, it may be easier to get people to pay the exact same amount for roads in the form of a fee to private entrepreneurs.

But proponents of private roads also believe that they can provide more bang for the buck. They believe they can be more businesslike and less susceptible to pork-barreling. But they may be kidding themselves, or kidding us. The Chicago-Kansas City road would cut through Peoria, Illinois, which is the district of House Minority Leader Bob Michel, who wrangled $400,000 out of the Federal Highway Administration to undertake a feasibility study of the project.

The principle that the beneficiaries of a new road should pay for it rather than the general taxpayer is a good one, although there is no particular reason that

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only private roads can achieve this. The Highway Trust Fund already roughly reflects this principle. Technology may soon make it possible to refine the system by charging more to people who drive in congested urban areas or at peak times of day. And finding ways to appropriate the increase in land values caused by a new road is a huge and completely justified new revenue source.

In the end, the critical question is whether private highways will cost less than public roads, and that's doubtful. The expense of regulating a constellation of independent roads, and of allocating land rights, could well outweigh any savings that private companies could achieve. And "private" is not synonymous with "competitive." The increased efficiency of private enterprise may not be enough to counterbalance the private company's ability to extract monopoly profits (plus whatever covert government subsidy they receive). Once a company has a contract to build a road, it does not necessarily face greater pressures to keep costs down than a public authority would—any more than do Defense Department contractors.

However, there are hybrid approaches that permit private involvement while preserving government authority. In Colorado a coalition of local governments is building a highway near Denver. Voters there approved a $10 vehicle registration fee, after which the highway authority issued $722 million in bonds. It then secured a $68 million letter of credit to begin building the first of four segments of the four-lane road. The private sector also has contributed $120 million in right-of-way land value along the 50-mile road, which has a total estimated cost of $580 million. Developers, of course, expect that their property values will rise because of the busy highway. They'll have to pay higher taxes that will finance two percent of the road.

In Orange County, California, three public toll roads totaling 65 miles and over $2 billion are scheduled for completion in 1996. With only $36 million in federal and state funds, almost half of the construction costs will come from fees levied on new development of land near the highway corridors. The rest will come from public bonds. After the construction costs are paid, the roads—which will be maintained by California's transportation department—will revert back to the state and will no longer charge tolls.

There is nothing wrong with a few private highway experiments, as long as they aren't "private" in name only, with the government guaranteeing a few lucky entrepreneurs a huge monopoly profit in the name of competitive free enterprise. But the point is to build roads as efficiently as possible, with costs allocated as fairly as possible, not to get hung up on whether the project is "public" or "private" and whether the charge is called a "tax" or a "toll." And to build them soon.

The absurdity of the American Express card.

LEAVE HOME WITHOUT IT

By Michael Lewis

The American Express cardmembers' booklet strives for an erotic tone, sort of like a financial Kamasutra, divided by chapter headings. Some of these—"EXPERIENCE THE FLEXIBILITY OF NO PRE-SET SPENDING LIMITS"—alert the mind to new possibilities. Others—"VERIFY AND RECORD EXPENSES WITH 'COUNTRY CLUB' BILLING"—confuse but in a flattering way, like having too many people grooming you at once. One especially caught my eye: "ENJOY THE RECOGNITION." The guide elaborates. "American Express Cardmembers enjoy a prestige that is associated with no other card. Cardmembers may feel this specialness as soon as they begin to use the card. When you use the card you may even notice that often you are served better and are accorded an added degree of respect."

That sounded like what I was after. So I took my green American Express Card to the local liquor store and bought a bottle of champagne. The salesman ran the card through his machine and handed me the charge slip to sign. But he gave me no feeling of specialness. Perhaps he is subtle, I thought. There was only one way to find out. I took another bottle of champagne from the rack but this time handed him my Visa card, and braced myself for scorn. Instead, he brightened.

"Oh you have Visa! Do you mind if we tear up the other slip and put both bottles on that?"

So much for recognition. So why else do 32 million

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people pay $55 and up each year for an American Express card?

Let's be reasonable. There are two simple criteria for judging a charge card. The first is how much it costs. The second is what you can do with it. By any objective measure, American Express is at the back of the pack. Its annual "membership" charges of $55 for a green card compares with between nothing and $20 for a Visa or Mastercard, depending on the issuing bank. (Visa and Mastercard, unlike Amex, are franchisers.) Even a Visa gold card is on average $15 cheaper than the Amex green. For Amex gold you pay $75; for the exalted platinum—"by invitation only"—$300.

Why is Amex pricier than the competition? First, Visa and Mastercard are credit cards; the banks that issue them make their profit mostly by lending money to consumers at exorbitant rates. The cards are primarily a way to attract borrowers. Amex, on the other hand, is a charge card, meaning that you have to clear your account each month. With perverse logic, American Express tries to persuade people that a charge card is somehow superior to a credit card. "Since you settle your account promptly," says their mouthwatering booklet, "you never have to pay any finance charges." But of course you never have to pay any finance charges with your Visa either, if you pay up each month. A bank credit card can be used as a charge card, but it has the nice option of a loan if you want it.

The main reason for the $55 price tag is simply that the Amex card is marketed as a luxury good, and has been since its birth in 1958. But in the early years it genuinely *was* a luxury good. Universal charge cards didn't exist. The first (purple) Amex card was meant primarily for use with airlines, hotels, and restaurants around the world. It provided a unique and useful, if rarefied, service, and the 253,000 people who bought one probably were special. Trotting the globe and paying with plastic was, after all, unusual.

Now it is not, as anyone who has seen an airport can testify. What's more, the role of the plastic card has changed as people use it not only for travel but for everything, and not only to buy but to borrow. Today there are 220 million major credit cards wedged into American wallets. In the last two years alone the volume of goods charged to cards nearly doubled, from $286 billion to $440 billion. Economies of scale have enabled high-volume, low-cost providers of the service such as Visa and Mastercard to move in. There are 190 million Visa cards in the world, and just 32 million Amex. Amex's market share has fallen steadily for the last ten years; most recently it is 19.8 percent, down from 21 percent in 1987 and 22 percent in 1986.

Were American Express selling a normal good, the first thing it would do to meet the competition would be to lower its fees. But the company maintains that it isn't selling a normal good. "The card," as the booklet says, "is much more than a simple payments instrument. . . ." Oh, really? How so? "[I]t is based on a membership principle." In other words, Amex is selling snob appeal, which has a logic all its own. And when you are selling snob appeal, trying to compete on price is not merely futile, it is self-defeating. An American Express card that cost no more than a Visa card would be worth even less.

Another rule for the snobbery seller is always to provide buyers with at least a flimsy justification for paying through the nose: mink is warmer, my new BMW is ten mph faster than my old one, I can read the diamond arms on my wristwatch more easily, and so on. You must create the illusion (and only the illusion, as cheaply as possible) that your product is different. No one actually wants to say, "Yes, I own an American Express card because it makes me feel superior." One wants to say, "I like Amex because of its Country Club billings" (which, by the way, simply means that you get copies of individual receipts each month).

As Visa and Mastercard have spread in recent years, Amex has tacked on all sorts of weird gifts of questionable value to shore up the myth that its card is superior. Unfortunately, bank cards have matched Amex freebie for absurd freebie (though they haven't marketed them with equivalent skill or force, which is why you are probably more aware of the benefits of Amex). The result is reminiscent of the battle among gas stations for business in the 1970s, when they gave away free drinking glasses that small children busted against back seats of family station wagons.

For example, insurance. Whether it is automobile or life, the nice thing about insurance is that the cost to the credit card company is fairly trivial, but describing it can fill up pages in a brochure. If you use your green card to buy a plane ticket, you are insured against precious bits of you falling off in transit—$50,000 for a hand or a foot, $100,000 for an eye and a hand or a foot, and so on. Die while using your American Express card, and your heirs are in the chips. That is, if it occurs to them to collect. Since most American Express cardholders probably already have life insurance, their Amex policy is superfluous.

Amex's latest, and most heavily hyped, freebie is the so-called "Purchase Protection Plan." Anything bought with an Amex card is insured for 45 days after the purchase. "If you lose your new prescription sunglasses," says the Amex booklet, "or if someone accidentally spills a drink on your new Oriental rug, all is not lost if the purchase is made with the American Express card." The service is a little silly: why would you want to insure against someone spilling a drink on your new Oriental rug only for the first 45 days? But Amex—and also Visa, which has matched it—may be playing with fire here. Purchase protection is like money-back guarantees in that it relies heavily on people not exploiting the system. I called a woman at the Amex plan and told her I had just backed my new Jaguar, paid for with a green card, into a salt water lake. It looked bad. Could she reimburse me? She sounded reluctant. "Well," she said, "I can help you file a claim." The system is too new to evaluate, but it is a

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safe bet that it will either be generally ignored or canceled.

Another distinction Amex makes much of is "No preset spending limit." No doubt this is genuinely handy for a few high rollers, and it is the single service that the bank cards don't offer. But most people I know (maybe I know the wrong people) can survive happily on the limits of $5,000 and more offered by bank credit cards. This only makes sense. We eventually have to pay for the things we buy (or at least that's the idea), and the limits imposed by bank cards are calculated with a generous eye on our ability to pay. Anyway, just because the limit isn't "pre-set" doesn't mean there isn't a limit. Have you ever actually tried to charge a Jaguar to a green card? Good luck.

The real purpose of a charge card isn't these various extras but simply a convenient way to pay for things. Sadly, a card performs this basic service more often if it doesn't say American Express on it. Visa, for example, is taken by seven million merchants worldwide. A mere 2.6 million take Amex. The reason for the sweeping victory of the bank cards over Amex is that Amex charges shops nearly twice as much for the privilege of accepting their cards. Amex's 1988 average "merchant discount" was 3.29 percent while Visa charged 1.7 percent. What annoys shopkeepers even more is that American Express takes far longer than the banks to pay up—which adds to the merchants' cost and to Amex's profits.

Ask Visa about their merchant charges and you get a straight answer. Ask Amex and you're told, "We don't release that information." (I got the 3.29 percent figure only by threatening to use instead the fee paid by shopkeepers in my neighborhood, which is five percent.) And the gap between Visa and Amex has been growing. In 1982 Visa's merchant charge was 2.41 percent and American Express's was 3.4 percent.

Eighty-eight billion dollars' worth of goods and services were charged to Amex cards in 1988, a tribute to the power of marketing. American Express billed merchants, on average, about 1.6 percent more than bank cards would have (not including the free loan implicit in delayed payments). In other words, of the $3 billion or so Amex collected from merchants, about $1.4 billion represents a sort of surcharge could have been avoided if we all used Visa. This surcharge is passed on to the customers, and is shared by all of them, not just those who use the American Express card.

Amex is about to launch a new ad campaign featuring a handful of expensive stores—Bergdorf Goodman, Neiman Marcus, K-Paul's Louisiana Kitchen—that take *only* American Express cards. The campaign is thoroughly disingenuous. The message underlying the ads—that Amex will get you into more places than the competition—is the opposite of the truth. Moreover, the ads don't say *why* these stores only accept American Express. The reason is that in exchange for agreeing not to take Visa or Mastercard, the stores have had their Amex merchant discounts cut to the bone and receive a fortune in free advertising.

In other words, even at the very few stores that only accept American Express, it isn't a matter of Amex making life more convenient for its own members. It's Amex making life *less* convenient for the rest of us. If there is any shop in the world that takes *only* the American Express card without being bribed by American Express, I'd be surprised. Without an especially sweet deal from Amex, there's no reason not to accept bank cards and every reason not to accept American Express. In fact, the only reason merchants do take American Express is that some customers still insist on paying with it.

I put the cold comparative facts of the matter to an intelligent friend, who is also a senior executive at American Express. I asked him why people should pay $55 for something they could have for $20 or for free. He said, "Intangibles." By which he means the elusive and vaguely erotic RECOGNITION AND SPECIALNESS. Shopping at Bergdorf's, "Country Club" billing, Oriental rugs, and prescription sunglasses. American Express markets its card as a badge that says, I AM A FINANCIAL SUCCESS: like pulling a fat wad of c-notes in a silver money clip from your breast pocket, only not as gross. In a current Amex television commercial, a man and his kid sister are finishing what looks to be a $60 restaurant meal:

BROTHER: Dad was afraid I'd find a starving artist up here.
SISTER: Oh, dad was worried.
BROTHER: OK, I admit I was a bit worried when my little sister took off on her own.
SISTER: I'm not so little anymore.
(The bill arrives on the table)
BROTHER: Here . . . let me get that.
SISTER: No way. It's mine.
(She drops her Amex card onto the tray)
BROTHER: American Express huh . . . I'm going to stop worrying about you.

We are supposed to imagine what brother might have said if sister had paid with Mastercard or Visa: "Visa, huh . . . you can use that to buy polyester pants suits at K-Mart, can't you?" Or worse: "You peasant. You soil the family name."

As evidence of basic solvency the American Express card is at least plausible. As a mark of distinction it is absurd. The card, says the brochure, is "much more than a simple payment instrument, it is based on a membership principle." Yet this is a club with 32 million members. It's not easy to manufacture "prestige" at such a high volume. It requires that we be told many millions of times that the club includes famous people such as Tip O'Neill, Wilt Chamberlain, and Helen Hayes, in whose reflected glory we may bathe. It requires 100 public relations specialists and (I am told) $350 million a year in ads and promotion. That's about ten dollars a year per card. Cardholders should know that nearly a fifth of their annual membership fee goes into ads to tell others: YOU CAN JOIN OUR EXCLUSIVE CLUB. Sort of defeats the purpose.

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American Express caters to a contradiction in terms: a popular craving for an elitist symbol. It isn't a club. It is a corporation with shareholders. It wants more than anything to grow and grow. But by growing it debases its currency. The only way around the conundrum is to stratify the membership. Thus American Express has given us an entire class system. Green spawned gold in 1966, gold spawned black in 1984, and black spawned platinum in 1985. (Visa and Mastercard followed with gold alone.) When platinum arrived there were about 500,000 gold card holders. One day there will be 500,000 platinum card holders (there are about 80,000 at present), and Amex will give us the diamond card. The impulse behind the scramble into a higher class of cardholder is the same as the one behind the purchase of an even bigger diamond collar for one's poodle. Except that even a $300 platinum Amex card is status on the relative cheap, and therefore relatively mass marketable.

And what about the 80,000 platinum cardholders? What exactly do they get for their $300 a year other than a sharp intake of breath from the lady at the checkout counter? It is not immediately obvious. The Amex literature reads a bit like a clever résumé: a few hazy accomplishments are made to fill up a lot of space. There seem to be five extra benefits accruing to platinum. (1) A $10,000 line of credit, which any rich person could get from a bank in a flash. (2) A "travel counselor who will book honeymoons, arrange personal vacations, and fulfill unusual travel requests," i.e., a travel agent, a service that is free even for poor people. (3) "An itemized record of activity at the end of each year." Well, useful perhaps. (4) "Preferred welcome: priority treatment offering deluxe services and special amenities at a select group of distinguished hotels and restaurants in the U.S., London and Paris." A fruit bowl, cheese, and crackers. (5) "Complimentary nonresident membership in 26 exclusive private Centurion clubs." I defer to Groucho Marx.

Thorstein Veblen explained it all years ago: in affluent societies the economic struggle "is substantially a race for reputability on the basis of . . . invidious comparison." One function of the flashy cards is to reflect glory and cachet on the cards beneath them, to attract the hoi polloi, like celebrities at a fund-raiser. The most Veblenesque of all members in the American Express family of plastic was the so-called "black privilege card." A handful of these were issued in 1984 to gold card holders who also had some minimum number of millions of dollars in American Express bank accounts. The black card was, as an Amex executive put it, "ultra-exclusive." It enabled holders to "do anything they wanted." For instance? "Well, they might need a helicopter sent to the middle of the Sahara to pick up their son on safari. We'd do that." Black card members were also able to arrange private shopping sprees late at night at expensive stores such as F.A.O. Schwarz and Neiman Marcus. Classy people who didn't want to flaunt their wealth found this useful. Small wonder, then, that Imelda Marcos and Adnan Khashoggi were two of the leading users.

Remind me again.

WHY ARE WE IN AFGHANISTAN?

By Robert Wright

For the past decade the anti-Communist guerrillas of Afghanistan have been secure in their status as American heroes. Democrats and Republicans alike have called them freedom fighters and ardently backed our policy of arming them. Reporters have called them "fiercely independent Muslim tribesmen" and written with awe of their bravery. A few years ago Dan Rather even put on a costume and sneaked across the Afghan border to be seen rubbing elbows with them.

All of this makes the next logical step in our Afghanistan policy a bit awkward: explaining to the rebels that we don't want them to actually, well, *win* their war of national liberation. We appreciate their driving the Soviet army out of the country, and we hope they've enjoyed our generous financial and moral support. But their 15 minutes are up.

This abandonment of the *mujaheddin*'s military campaign isn't yet administration policy. Officially, the United States still vows to stand by the rebels until they unseat President Najibullah, the Soviet puppet in Kabul. But eventually someone as pragmatic as, say, James Baker is bound to confront the strange truth: of the several outcomes that seem plausible now that the Soviet army is gone, the worst would be for the rebels finally to reach the military goals we've helped them pursue for the last ten years.

Unfortunately, the longer it takes the administration to admit this, the harder it will be to realize the best of

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the plausible outcomes: a brokered peace, sponsored by the United Nations, the United States, and the U.S.S.R. Many of the *mujaheddin* will not immediately embrace this idea, but in the end it could bring Afghanistan the self-determination, sovereignty, and unity they profess to want—or, at least, as close an approximation of these things as is likely to come by any other means.

Oddly enough, this conclusion, though still resisted by the most devout supporters of past policy on Afghanistan, more or less follows from the logic that has driven that policy. What keeps people from seeing this is the fog bank of inspirational rhetoric that was used to sustain public support for the policy. According to that rhetoric, our involvement with the *mujaheddin* was borne of moral outrage at the violation of national sovereignty by the invading Soviet army and of sympathy for the oppressed. And no doubt there was genuine outrage and sympathy within both the Carter administration, which started the arms flow, and the Reagan administration, which sustained and accelerated it. Still, at bottom, our policy in Afghanistan has been simple cold war realpolitik, and our goal has been to frustrate Soviet expansionism.

If you look closely at the inspirational rhetoric, you can see the realpolitik between the lines. Reagan, in a 1986 message to Congress about the Reagan Doctrine, said, "We have acted in the belief that our peaceful and prosperous future can best be assured in a world in which other peoples too can determine their own destiny, free of coercion or tyranny from either at home or abroad." In other words: we're the superpower; they're the proxies.

In the case of Afghanistan, it wasn't just expansion in south Asia and the Middle East that was of concern. Yes, some people worried that the Soviet invasion presaged more mischief in the region, such as the destabilization, even invasion, of Pakistan. In this view, well-armed Afghan rebels were a wall between the Soviets and their long-sought warm-water port. But much of the support for arming the rebels, in both the Carter and Reagan administrations, was more generic. The object of the game was just to teach the Soviets a lesson. For the first time, they had sent their troops beyond the confines of the Warsaw Pact, and they had to be punished. Further, they had sent their troops into a quagmire, and thus could be punished inexpensively. Indeed, among the more cynical and less insecure of conservative strategists, the invasion of Afghanistan was greeted not with alarm but with something bordering on glee. The Soviets had stumbled badly, and now we could keep them "tied down" in Afghanistan. If all went well, this might not only divert their resources from other global opportunities, but even hasten a general review of the costs and benefits of adventurism in the Third World. Whichever of these rationales you choose, the function of the Afghan freedom fighters, from our (real) point of view, was not to bring freedom and democracy to their homeland, or even to prevail over the Soviets militarily. Rather, it was to irritate and stymie the Soviets; to trade corpses with them as long as both sides felt up to it.

One sign of how little serious thought the Reagan administration gave to an outright rebel victory is how it spent its money. A disproportionate amount of the arms we've distributed among the seven rebel factions has gone to the very last guy we should want to lead a post-victory Afghan government: a murderous anti-American fundamentalist named Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who heads the Hezb-i-Islami (Party of Islam). Hekmatyar most recently made news in July, when his fighters slaughtered 36 members of a rival *mujaheddin* faction and tortured a few of them by pouring gunpowder in their eyes and lighting it. The alibi for our strong support of Hekmatyar is that it was a concession to Pakistan's Interservices Intelligence agency (Pakistan's CIA), which serves as the conduit for rebel aid and has its own reasons for liking him. True enough. Still, had the intentions of our policy-makers extended much beyond inflicting prolonged misery on the Russians, we probably could have divvied up the money with more foresight.

The recent tendency of freedom fighters to murder and torture one another helps explain why the collapse of the Najibullah regime—once assumed to follow automatically from a Russian pullout—hasn't happened and doesn't appear imminent. What little unity the rebels ever had was a product of three things: (*a*) a hated foreign intruder (the Red Army); (*b*) a hated puppet dictator (most recently Najibullah); and (*c*) the fact that Western aid, funneled through a shell rebel coalition based in Pakistan, was made contingent on a show of unity. Now (*a*) the Russians are gone and (*b*) Najibullah has launched a kinder-gentler offensive that includes being nice to his urbanite subjects and offering peace and large chunks of turf to rebel commanders who will leave him alone. That leaves (*c*), which doesn't seem to be doing the trick.

If Western money can't keep the rebels behaving themselves even now, imagine what will happen if Najibullah does fall. We could well see a bloodbath longer and more spectacular than the simple massacre of Communist bureaucrats that American hardliners have long dreamed of (and bloodier—at least in terms of pints per week—than the ongoing repression of the Communist regimes that have governed Afghanistan for the past decade). No one can say how long it would take for things to reach equilibrium, what that equilibrium would look like, or how much the West could shape it (not to mention the question of how much we'd *want* to shape it, having invested so much rhetorical energy in self-determination for the Afghan people). But there seems to be a good chance of an outcome that would in one way or another make our decade of support for the freedom fighters look highly ironic.

The possibilities range from a fundamentalist America-hating dictator (though nothing on the Ayatollah scale is considered likely) to ongoing diffuse chaos (the "Lebanon scenario") to an authoritarian regime that evolves willfully into a Soviet client. There are

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brighter scenarios, too. The one the administration clings to is that the rebels will take Kabul, lay down their weapons, and call for fair elections. But little in Afghanistan's history—and not much in human history, for that matter—gives reason to bet on this.

What to do? Going strictly by the cold calculus that got us into Afghanistan, you could make a fairly strong case for pulling the plug: stopping the arms shipments, or scaling them down rapidly. After all, virtually all the goals of our Afghanistan policy have been reached. The Soviet Union's troops are out, and though its puppet, Najibullah, remains, Gorbachev seems unlikely to use Afghanistan as a base for adventurism. Indeed, more broadly, Gorbachev seems to have given Russia's expansionist foreign policy a more thorough rethinking than we dared hope for back when spurring such reflection was one of the main reasons for arming the rebels. Besides, even if the Soviets did suddenly revert to adventurism, Afghanistan would make a poor stepping-stone. The most widely feared regional adventure—an invasion or destabilization of Pakistan—will be tricky so long as the *mujaheddin* stand between Kabul and the Pakistani border.

Pulling the plug could even have a stabilizing effect. With the Russian troops gone and U.S. money cut off, a lasting deal might be struck between Najibullah and the various rebel commanders. If he continued to mellow (not that I'm betting on it), the result might even be a government as coherent and benign as has often been found in Afghanistan: not democratic but highly decentralized, with most regions effectively governed in accordance with their dominant ethnic and religious tradition.

In fact, such an outcome would resemble the hoped-for result of a negotiated settlement, with one big difference: in a brokered peace, we would want even the kinder, gentler Najibullah replaced with a legitimate ruler. For that reason alone, peace talks are preferable to pulling the plug.

And, as Selig Harrison of the Carnegie Endowment has noted, there are other reasons as well to start talking peace immediately. (Harrison, one of the foremost proponents of this view, has a good track record: he was vocally supporting the U.N. talks that led to the Soviet pullout back when almost no one considered a pullout likely, and he was among the few analysts to warn that a rebel victory would not come on the heels of the pullout.) First, the war continues to bleed Pakistan—now home of a few million Afghan refugees, among other imported problems—at a time when democracy has a fresh chance there. (One of the enduring ironies of our Afghanistan policy is that by cranking up the volume on the war, especially during the mid-'80s, we did nearly as much damage to Pakistan as a mildly successful destabilization campaign by the Soviets would have done. That explains why Benazir Bhutto now favors peace talks.) Second, unless the rebels feel their oats soon, our bargaining position is going to deteriorate steadily, as Najibullah starts looking more and more viable. And third, let's not forget the stars of the show: the Afghan people. As long as the war goes on, they die on a daily basis. About a million have already been killed during this little shoving match between us and the Soviets, and you can expect some big body counts if the rebels fight on to victory . Their basic offensive strategy seems to be to pick a big city and shell it until there are no signs of activity.

It's worth bearing in mind that the people killed in such shellings are Afghans, not Soviets. Some may be Communist Afghans, but many are just people who were in the wrong place at the wrong time. Besides, if we meant what we've been saying about self-determination, their ideology wouldn't matter; the goal would be a government that embodies the collective aspirations of the Afghan people, and we would want as many of them as possible to still be breathing when election time comes.

A negotiated settlement will take time and patience. Najibullah and the rebel commanders alike will have grave reservations about it, partly because it will ultimately mean less superpower money for them. But the superpowers seem to have enough leverage to get them to the table (i.e., the threat of withdrawing *all* the money), and Gorbachev is said to be willing to give up Communist control of Afghanistan. (For one thing, he's not wild about single-handedly funding the reconstruction of a war-torn, backward country.)

It would be easy, now that the cold war appears to be winding down, to ridicule the hard-nosed geostrategic thinking that led us to accelerate the rate of dying in Afghanistan. After all, the overall rethinking of Moscow's expansionist foreign policy probably had more to do with Mikhail Gorbachev's ascendancy and with long-term economic decline than with well-armed Afghan rebels. So there's a decent chance that the Red Army would by now be out of Afghanistan even if Western aid to the freedom fighters had been quite low, or even nil. But no one can say for sure that turning up the heat in Afghanistan wasn't decisive. And, besides, this sort of hindsight isn't fair. At the time, the Soviet threat looked real enough, and the cynical appropriation of the rebels' noble cause seemed fair, as cold war policy goes. (Certainly the rebels weren't complaining.)

But now that the Soviet threat has faded, to insist on spending a hundred thousand more Afghan lives just to give America's far right (and a few posturers on both sides in Congress) the taste of Communist blood would be to carry cynicism beyond the bounds of propriety. And justifying such a policy in terms of some spiritual commitment to freedom fighters everywhere would be the most cynical thing of all.

The policy-makers who most resist a negotiated settlement tend to be the ones most fearful that Gorbachev will ultimately prove to have been a mirage—that he'll either return the Soviet Union to a Brezhnevian mode or step down in favor of someone who will. This may be true, which is all the more reason to sit down at the table now. •

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Stanley Kauffmann on Films

An Arrival

Possibly the greatest pleasure in an art work is our perception that there is more in it than what we see or read or hear. Book or music or painting, play or film, what arrests us and awes us is the realization that the inexpressible is arising from what is being expressed. Howard Moss said: "Poetry is essentially the use of words to express the nonverbal," and the statement is easily adjusted to fit the other arts.

The greater the art work, the truer Moss's statement is—in fact, the degree of "inexpressibility" may be the measure of a work's greatness. But every good artist gives us this experience in some proportion. Among American filmmakers Jim Jarmusch, with *Stranger Than Paradise* and *Down By Law*, showed that he began and ended with what we couldn't literally see or hear. Now there appears another young American with the same interest in the inexpressible, the same concern to use the objects and utterances of the everyday as stepping stones to and through the mysterious.

Steven Soderbergh is 26 and, in conventional terms, is virtually uneducated. He began making films when he was 13, in high school in Baton Rouge; after high school, he went to Los Angeles, got some film writing and editing experience, returned home, did odd jobs while continuing to write screenplays, commuted for a time between L.A. and Baton Rouge to pick up editing work, then in 1986 made a feature-length documentary about a rock group. After two more years of striving and tugging, Soderbergh finally got the chance to make his first fiction feature, **sex, lies, and videotape** (Miramax). (He says he uses lower case in the title because it looks better. Apparently this doesn't apply to his own and other names.) Festival prizes prove very little about quality, but after that history, it's worth noting that this first film won the Palme d'Or at Cannes this year.

This biographical sketch has two special points of interest. First, it proves yet again that, along with the requisite gifts for filmmaking, the beginner—and not only the beginner—must have immense courage and drive to get the chance to use his or her gifts in the film world. Second, after some ten years of bustle in the workaday world of film manufacture, Soderbergh came up with a film that is subtle and quiet, a matter of resonances.

All three elements in the title are present in the picture, but the lies and the videotape come from and feed back into the sex. The four young people who are the film's center are like sea creatures, and the sea they dwell in is the ambience of sex. John is a successful lawyer in Baton Rouge, married to Ann. No children. And, of late, no sex. We discover this from Ann's sessions with her analyst, which also reveal her to be not especially disturbed by the absence of sex in her marriage. She says. Nearby lives her sister, Cynthia, apparently a painter who supports herself by working as a bartender. Sex is plentiful in *her* life, most of it being provided at present by her sister's husband. Back to Baton Rouge comes Graham, a college friend of John's whom he hasn't seen in nine years. Graham stays briefly with John and Ann while he looks for a place of his own—long enough for him (without knowing it) to arouse something in Ann.

John is smooth, assured, sexually prodigal, and an excellent liar. Ann is somewhat consciously refined, discontent but not desperate, punctilious, and has the quick protective pride of the unassured. Cynthia is lubricious, casual, high-handed, frank about her behavior except for her current affair. The most arcane figure is Graham, who is at once calm, self-possessed, meditative, yet quite out of love with himself. He berates himself for having been a pathological liar, yet is now generally candid. He has no occupation but seems to have sufficient money. Among the many photographs on the wall of his new home are the faces of John L. Lewis and Lillian Gish. He is no sexual adventurer: he confesses to Ann, who likes him, that he has been impotent for some years (possibly because of his rejection by a girl in college nine years before). Yet he provides

FILMS WORTH SEEING

Do the Right Thing. *Spike Lee, the writer and director, explores a Brooklyn black community with mastery, then finishes with an explosion that makes us see all that has gone before in a different light. (Reviewed 7/3/89)* **Four Adventures of Reinette and Mirabelle.** *Eric Rohmer's best since* The Marquise of O. . . *These episodes about two contemporary young Frenchwomen perfectly match their form and content. (8/28/89)* **Lawrence of Arabia.** *It's important to be reminded that this film is historically free. It's also important to remember that art, though it has responsibilities, is not history. A wonderful film. (2/20/89)* **When Harry Met Sally....** *Bright and brisk comedy-romance, with just enough feinting at serious themes to keep the whole thing moving along. (8/21/89)* **—SK**

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the sexual focus and locus of the film—through his videotapes.

For some time Graham has been using a camcorder to videotape interviews with young women who respond to his gentle questions about their sex lives. Each of the women has done this voluntarily after he has promised to keep the contents of the tapes confidential. However, the mere knowledge that this storehouse of sex exists affects other women. When Cynthia volunteers to be interviewed, we can see that it is partly because Graham intrigues her as the person who made those tapes. But there's something else. She wants to be part of that library. And there's something *else*. The camcorder itself is seductive. It provides a kind of sexual experience, alone yet not alone, exultant yet purgative. All this is aided by Graham's manner, which is reserved, observant, non-judgmental. (The analogy between Ann's analyst and the camcorder is patent.)

These tapes—their very existence, not what's in them—create a kind of gateway through which all four of the principal lives eventually pass into an altered domain of desire. The details of the plot are not novel or surprising; affinities are realigned, the disappointment with that long-gone college girl is unintentionally avenged. What the film is after, beyond its dialogue and action, is the musk of sex, an obeisance to powers little understood and not always controlled. (In this regard the film resembles Pinter's play *Old Times*.) This is the "non-verbal" that Soderbergh's poem evokes.

The evocation is helped by the way he treats people and space, the sense that each person is surrounded by his or her own penumbra and that these penumbrae can merge hotly. He is helped enormously by the interplay of his actors, whom he has cast like a master. Peter Gallagher as John, Andie MacDowell as Ann, Laura San Giacomo as Cynthia, and James Spader as Graham create people individualized wholly—with subtle shades of inflection and with wry implied humor about their situations in the world of sex. Soderbergh has spoken of the 40 hours of rehearsal before shooting started (very little for a play, enormous for a film), in which the four actors eased themselves into their roles, limbered the dialogue, and "found" one another. They emerged, under the director, as an ensemble.

Walt Lloyd photographed the film with an eye that renders rooms as emblems. Cliff Martinez's music, often electronic, sustains the moods that are everything here. All of those involved have helped Soderbergh to make a film that goes past what it shows to disclose what can't be seen. It's a fine achievement. •

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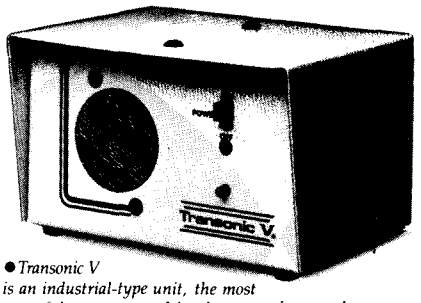

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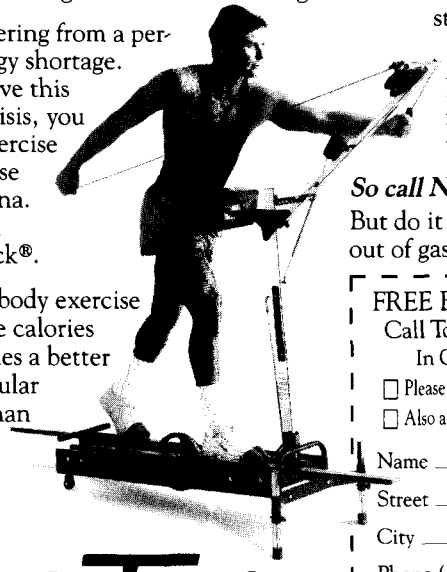

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Mark Stevens on Art

Sculpted Essences

For most of its history, sculpture has been a remembering art, making more permanent what men cannot easily abandon to time. Marble, bronze, and even wood add the touch of eternity; and touch is what's called for when something as distant as eternity is invoked. (Otherworldly paintings seem especially suited to walls made of stone.) Modernist sculpture was less a remembering art; but in its own manner, by rejecting dated conventions, by concentrating on the abstract principles of form, by making use of primitive and non-Western sources, it still displayed a passion for the timeless.

As a rule, contemporary sculpture is less high-minded about time. There seem to be fewer things nowadays that deserve immortality or require remembering in a static or monumental way. Gods and heroes and myths have lost power (the words themselves are like statues of commemoration), and the camera is effectively preserving the appearances of the charming and the dead. Not many people talk of the timeless; intellectuals today are obsessed with proving that art is entirely time-bound. Still, the old purposes do occasionally steal into contemporary sculpture, often as a kind of melancholy haunting. At several recent shows of sculpture—which ranged from modern to minimal and postmodern—the forms cast some ancient shadows across the mind's eye.

The British sculptor Anthony Caro was a friend of David Smith, perhaps the last sculptor to make work of convincing grandeur. Like Smith, Caro is part of the modernist tradition that stripped away the conventional attributes of sculpture. While his art may allude to the world of surface appearance, recalling a figure or a natural element, it remains fundamentally abstract, and it employs materials (such as steel) characteristic of our time. This has made him a favorite of formalist critics. But Caro himself seems to sense that an art concerned only with formal issues eventually turns in upon itself, and becomes a mirror looking at a mirror. Like Smith, he takes an interest in essentials that are not formal. Among the titles for his recent show at the André Emmerich Gallery were *Xanadu* and *El Dorado*. The titles suggest that he hopes to bring the power of myth into art, that is, to restate the eternal in contemporary terms. He does that almost better than anyone, but it's not an easy task. Over the years so many modern artists have used important-sounding titles to elevate their work that one begins to grow weary looking for the mark of the sublime in this or that piece of Rorschach rust. A squiggle called "The River of Life" will impress too many people.

But there was a beautiful sculpture in Caro's exhibit that made this effort to awaken the past curiously moving. *The Descent from the Cross (After Rubens)* is a construction modeled after the painter's great altarpiece (1611-14) in Antwerp. The Rubens is a work of intense drama. The color cries out. The light is a flash in darkness. Around the majestic stability of the cross the figures swirl and twist. One man, perched on top like a sailor on a mast, grabs the shroud with his teeth to make better use of his hands. The shapes tumble downward with the deadweight of Christ, yet a lovely circular line formed by arms, the shroud, and Christ's leg seems to prevent the body from a graceless fall. And all the movement is superbly balanced, which makes the cockeyed angle of Christ's dead arm ever more shocking.

Caro's sculpture is less dramatic. Made of rusted steel, it is eight feet high, but it does not look especially tall. The formal analysis of the Rubens is reasonably faithful. A close comparison between the two works offers a superb training for the eye, for Caro has laid bare the dynamic stresses of the painting, making good use of the cross and the ladder (themselves abstract constructed objects) to stabilize the diagonals and anchor the motion. The color is lyrical rather than surprising, a tonal play of browns and grays, sometimes softened further by rubbed-in wax. The white of the shroud is gently surprising.

Some critics will consider this work just a useful exercise, like drawing a bust or boning a fish. It has the aspect of a diagram, of course; but the diagram is done with passion. The Caro is more than a version of the Rubens. The latter is a remarkably frontal painting; but Caro, working in three dimensions, also considered the rear and the sides. (What a curious thing, to imagine the backside of a masterpiece.) The transposition of the drama is also affecting. Rubens pushed everything to the hilt: his painting is highly vertical, the bodies elongated, the spaces almost liquid. Caro's less exalted work, while formally abstract, is more realistic in other ways. The metal flows less easily than the paint, and the size of the sculpture suits *us*: the Rubens exists in an exalted religious space, but the Caro stands in real space, adjusted to everyday scale.

At the Emmerich gallery, Caro bravely hung a reproduction of the Rubens near the sculpture—which should be done not just for the academic comparison, but for the poetry that passes between the two. The Rubens is magisterial, but the Caro belongs to you and me. It is both more intellectual and more ordinary. One moment it appears fresh, the next it looks rusted. This is Beckett country; one wobbles between Godot and God. In a way, Caro has done what the best modern translators do. The original remains; the translation tries; something half-new is born. And meanwhile, we experience the gulf between the two works as an uncertain pleasure, reminding us of who we are and what we can no longer be. Being modern is feeling that one is always on the wrong end of a translation.

Unlike Caro, many artists of the 1960s and 1970s seemed eager to cleanse their works of memory. Impatient with art that aimed to be anything more than abstract, and eager to deflate any outsized pretensions, they took pride in confining themselves to the essentials of form, material, and place. Minimalist sculptors were particularly severe in this regard. Christopher Wilmarth, the subject of a retrospective this summer at the Museum of Modern Art, developed his art in those years, and he employed some of the favored means: simple geometry, industrial materials, and so on. But he was one of those artists who, while using the means of the moment, work against the grain of the time.

Wilmarth's principal material was glass. He found that by using acid he could create a scumbled glass surface, which looks something like a fogged windshield or a frosted window. Sometimes he ran a straight steel line across the surface of the glass. In other works, he placed a rectangular steel plate some distance behind the glass, creating a sense of dark interior shadows. Although Wilmarth worked with geometry and glass, he was not interested in see-through clarities. He was a master of the penumbral, a melancholy artist in whose art light seems to thicken toward the in-

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describable and profound. The moody rectangles of Rothko seem close to Wilmarth in both spirit and scale. The organizer of the exhibit, Laura Rosenstock, also notes a connection to Mallarmé; Wilmarth said that the poet's "imagination and reverie meant more to [Mallarmé] than anything that was actually of this world. His work is about the anguish and longing of experience not fully realized, and I found something of myself in it."

In the 1980s Wilmarth used glass less, and his work became very black. He often attached a dark, rather beat-up ovoid shape that looks like a head (or an egg or a womb) to a blackened metal plate. Often the metal sparked with fiery little scratches. Perhaps these death-haunted sculptures are self-portraits; they are, in any case, nakedly expressionist in spirit, and make the Sturm und Drang of many of today's painters look like an outing in the park. Wilmarth committed suicide in 1987. It would be vulgar to let that dominate an evaluation of his work (Rosenstock doesn't mention it in her useful essay), but the suicide does add a significant point of emphasis: he wasn't fooling around.

By quickly exhibiting Wilmarth's art before the dispersal of his estate, MOMA has done a service. Wilmarth was respected, but not widely known; his sensibility was too quirky and inward-looking to attract much attention. This show (together with a show of drawings at Hirschl & Adler Modern) demonstrated that Wilmarth was actually one of the best artists of his time, with a far more interesting mind than most of the famous minimalists. His reputation will grow as that of more celebrated colleagues declines. The shadow he brought to glass was important. Although steel and glass buildings crowd the world with shiny surfaces, Wilmarth, who considered his sculptures "places," reclaimed glass for deeper reflections.

A clarity that yields to melancholy, as light darkens toward shadow or present succumbs to past: Wilmarth was a master of that sort of poetic decay. Anne and Patrick Poirier are French sculptors who work more directly with ruins. They make the ruins themselves; or, to be more precise, they create models and evocations of classical ruins. In one interior installation of their "Wandering into Memory" at the Storm King Art Center in Mountainville, New York—a beautiful sculpture park about an hour and a half from Manhattan—the Poiriers have constructed a miniature city, with classical columns rising from what looks like piles of black ash. Prancing upward out of the ruins, like some strange emanation of the apocalypse, is a huge electric blue horse—*Pegasus*.

ANTHONY CARO, *THE DESCENT FROM THE CROSS (AFTER RUBENS)*, 1987-88

Other works are more conceptual. In one series, the Poiriers took photographs of crumbling classical sculptures and then printed a single Greek word in red on each photograph, the words (here translated) being "Void," "Origin," "Collapse," "Fragility." Elsewhere they make much of the word play ROMA/AMOR. Sometimes they include giant versions of classical heads in their works. Anne Poirier has written about the "gaze" of ancient statues: "It is the gaze of memory which, for centuries, has been absorbing the sun, the images. A gaze that would want to render an account of the dialogue between centuries and cultures that the eyes of ancient statues seem to express."

The Poiriers' works are appealing, but they do not quite convince. A fascination with ruins, and their many metaphorical meanings, is such a commonplace of Western culture that any artist who takes up the theme had better create something irresistible. And inspiration is what's missing here. The Poiriers' art usually seems like an illustration of fairly obvious ideas, rather than a gift from an unexpected direction. They want to evoke the mysterious "gaze" of the ancients, but I couldn't escape the smell of the seminar room. The itty-bitty cities have a certain fascination, but it's mostly the memory of doll houses, toy soldiers, and the delightful childhood fantasy of dominating the world (let's crush those ants!) that pleases, not some higher order of cultural remembrance.

Why do almost all sculptors revere Brancusi? Perhaps because he renewed the ruins. While drawing from both ancient and modern sources, his art nonetheless appears seamless. It has an aura of timeless perfection that seems the equal of both past and present. Early this summer, a sculptor named Scott Burton put together an interesting and troublesome exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art that concentrated upon Brancusi's pedestals. (The exhibit was part of a series at MOMA in which living artists are asked to make a show of works from the permanent collection that particularly matter to them.) Burton went so far as to take apart a famous Brancusi called *Fish* in order to display only its base.

Now, Brancusi's pedestals are anything but ordinary. The artist devoted much thought to them. But Burton's show still offended those who believed that great works of art were being manhandled, not just by disassembling one, but by allowing a lesser artist to impose his sensibility upon a master. Neither offense is worth the grumble. What excites a young artist in a master is often

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revealing about both; and a temporary show that tries to reconsider or desacralize a masterpiece (whether successfully or not) may provoke some fresh thinking. It is Burton's view "that some of Brancusi's pedestal-tables are of the same conceptual order as any of his busts or torsos. His best pieces of furniture are not only functional objects but also representations of functional objects. We have here *sculptures of tables*, close in character to Brancusi's other sculpture. They are both object and subject."

A popular postmodern artist, who had a show recently at the Max Protech Gallery in New York, Burton himself makes sculpture of furniture. His chairs will provide you a seat, for example, but their primary function is to serve you art. Burton's "pieces"—that word is emblematic of today's art world and adds the right accent to "furniture"—are often massive hunks enlivened by an interesting angle or proportion. They have an elephantine delicacy. They owe a particular debt to Brancusi's *Table of Silence*, located in a park in Romania (to which Wilmarth once made a pilgrimage). Brancusi's large circular limestone table, surrounded by stone seats, looks as if it could please both picnickers and Druids. Burton's furniture does not have that reach. It has a sheen. And the sheen is, of course, postmodern.

The show inevitably reveals more about Burton than about Brancusi. Burton has respectfully knocked the great visionary off his pedestal, admired what remains, which is the pedestal itself, and turned it into a chair—upon which he may sit dreaming up his own work. By separating the bases from the works they support, and declaring that the top and bottom are of "the same conceptual order," he has, in effect, broken Brancusi into indistinguishable pieces. An artist will frequently make a charming ruin of another artist's work, using the rubble to build a foundation for his own imagination. (In a way, Caro dismembered Rubens.) In fact, the greatest often misunderstand the best.

Still, an artist can select among the pieces. The pedestals may be wonderful creations too often overlooked, but focusing on them so resolutely seems an odd choice with an artist of Brancusi's stature. The effect trivializes. I suspect that Burton has chosen the aspect of Brancusi that seems least threatening to the present moment. "In a Warholian context," he writes, "Brancusi as the mystic saint may not appeal, but his conceptual side—his imaginative and intellectual questioning of the limits of art—is a legitimate, available, and welcome model."

There are artists, like Christopher Wilmarth, who smuggle some of the big stuff past "the Warholian context." But they are few. More often it seems that contemporary culture would really prefer to turn all art into furniture. The rich regard art as a comfortable commodity, the scholars treat it as a social object in need of stripping. I like Burton's sculpture, but the big stone seats remind me of empty thrones.

The Art of Survival

BY JOSEF ŠKVORECKÝ

Life With a Star
by Jiří Weil
translated by Ruzena Kovarikova with Roslyn Schloss

(Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 208 pp., $22.95)

Sometime in the summer of 1956 or 1957, I ran into Jiří Israel Weil in front of the Communist Party Museum in Prague. He was about to leave, but he beckoned me inside. "I want to show you something!" We walked through the exhibition halls, which were empty, except for gun-toting guards and a group of schoolchildren pushed around by their teacher. Weil led me to an old framed photograph of a group of men descending a staircase. The caption identified them as comrade Klement Gottwald (the Czech Communist Party leader) and his co-workers leaving the meeting in 1929 at which, over the opposition of deviationists or opportunists (I forget which), he carried out the "bolshevization of the Czechoslovak Communist Party." In plain language, the homegrown, Czech-oriented Party had been transformed into a subservient branch of the Russian center, and Gottwald himself into a personal agent (and later an executioner) for Stalin.

"How do you like me at 29?" asked Weil, pointing to the picture on the wall with a roguish smile. "How do I look?" I tried to find his bespectacled face in the indistinct countenances surrounding Gottwald, but failed. "Did you wear glasses then?" "I did," Weil nodded, and in his smile I seemed to recognize something of a triumph. I turned back to the picture, again in vain. "Well, here I am! Right beside Gottwald!" Weil laughed and pointed to a large plant in the middle of the staircase. Now I understood. He was glowing with pride at his disappearance. For the renegade writer had been air-brushed out of the official photograph.

The official transformation of Jiří Weil from man into plant was owed to his expulsion from the Party (in the mid-1930s he worked under Béla Kun in the International Department of the Comintern in Moscow) after the assassination of Kirov, and his banishment to the camps of Kirghizia and Kazakhstan. After almost a year in exile, Weil was permitted to return to Prague; legend has it that Marieta Shaginyan, a writer for whom Stalin had a weakness, helped him out. But otherwise Weil was spared very little in his life.

After the war, which he barely survived in hiding, Weil applied for readmission into the Party. His mandatory "self-criticism" from that period is a classical—and pitiful—document of its kind:

> The Party sent me to Moscow . . . and that's where my personal tragedy begins. It turned out that I was not a good Communist; that, in essence, I remained a petit-bourgeois who reacted negatively to the petty difficulties of everyday life of Soviet citizens. . . . When a letter of mine was discovered, dating back to the beginning of my sojourn in Moscow, in which I complained about a lack of comfort, I was rightfully expelled from the Party and sent to the Interhelp colony in Central Asia.

But the self-humiliation did not help him. His beloved Party never took him back.

Weil did not better himself in the eyes of the watchful when, in 1937, he published his first novel, *From Moscow to the Border*. It was not exactly a polished work of art, but it may very well be the first novel about the purge after Kirov's murder and about the beginning of the Great Terror. Everything is here: mass arrests, ridiculous accusations of incredible crimes, denunciations, false interpretations of perfectly legitimate actions, cynicism, and cruel deeds, often committed to save one's own neck. The literati of the Czech Party,

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all friends of Weil, jumped at their prey and tore the blasphemy apart.

Julius Fučík, the dubious martyr killed by the Gestapo, one of those reliably blind political pilgrims who at the height of the Terror continued singing the praises of life in Soviet Russia, saw nothing but libel and gossip in Weil's work, and called it "kitschy trash." Bedřich Václavek, a much better critic, was equally unable to discern anything in the book that was not malicious slander. Most sadly, even Záviš Kalandra, one of Weil's closest friends, distrusted the veracity of his text. According to the unpublished memoirs of one of their circle, Kalandra teased Weil: "Don't you exaggerate a little bit, Georgie? Don't you exaggerate quite a lot?" Fifteen years later Kalandra learned that Weil had not exaggerated at all. Not yet fully recovered from the concentration camp at Ravensbrück, this historian of Czech paganism (the manuscript of his major work on the subject was destroyed by the Gestapo) was hanged as a "Trotskyite" in one of the late Stalinist trials in Prague. Not even Albert Einstein's intervention could save his life. (In a particularly gruesome irony, at the very moment that he was reprimanding Weil for his novel, Kalandra was working on an article on "Prague Execution Sites" for their mutual friend, Milena Jesenská, Kafka's Milena, who edited the socialist cultural journal *The World of Work*.)

Only one Communist critic, Bohumil Mathesius, the translator of Soviet classics, showed some understanding of the heretical novel, and explained it with unwitting truthfulness. Weil's intention, he said, was "to paint a positive picture of Soviet life," but "the material gained by personal experience revolted against his design." The novel was not the work of a blind true believer, but a testimony to the inevitable clash of an honest intellectual with the practice of Stalinism. The ideological world gave way to the world of unfiltered experience. The child saw that the emperor was naked. The Party lost a propagandist, and Czech literature gained a writer.

In a non-literary and non-political way, the novel continued to haunt Weil for many years to come. Heli Glas, the young and pretty socialite, and her husband, Fischl, a pair of parlor bolsheviks who worked in Moscow while Weil was there (editing, among other things, the first Soviet translation of *The Good Soldier Švejk*), were among the thousands upon thousands executed in the bloodbath following the Kirov affair, and the "evidence" of their portraits in *From Moscow to the Border* was said to have carried weight at their trial. Weil learned about this after the war, and the rumor caused him deep and lasting anguish.

And another ordeal awaited Weil. Like almost everyone who was not a political innocent, he did everything to escape his fate during the Holocaust. Many Communists (though not as many as one would expect) left clandestinely for the Soviet Union, but that route, as Weil knew only too well, was closed to him. There was some hope that with the help of a friend married to a Westerner he would make it to England. But those were pre-refugee times. Only recently had civilized Europe disbelieved the stories of terror told by White Russian exiles, and it was not about to believe the stories of the high-tech atrocities of Auschwitz; and nobody, of course, read that big, vulgar bore of a book called *Mein Kampf*. Weil did not make it to England.

Another friend, Olga Frenclová, in a gesture unknown in the pre-war times of bourgeois civilization, had an idea: since she was not Jewish, a risky solution was possible. There was a loophole in the Nürenberg Laws, according to which Jewish spouses of non-Jews were exempt from deportations. And so they were married on March 19, 1942, at the time when the first transports were leaving the Theresienstadt ghetto for the death camps in the east. In 1942 such marriages were regarded as provocations; they were extremely dangerous, even if they saved lives.

Still another helper came to Weil's rescue. He was given the bizarre job of "assistant acclimatizer of plants" in the Jardin expérimental d'acclimatisation owned by the South American explorer A. V. Frič, an unreal figure, a surviving representative of the extinct breed of the 19th-century mad scientists straight out of Jules Verne, butterfly net and all. But Weil did not stay long in the rickety villa

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of the eccentric. Olga soon lost her job because her husband was not Aryan, and the marriage was, against the wishes of the pair, officially annulled.

A few days later Weil received the dreaded draft ticket, which permitted him to take 50 kilograms of personal belongings for the journey to Theresienstadt, and then eastward. He managed to avoid the journey. He faked a suicide, jumping from a bridge into the Moldau river and leaving a briefcase on the bridge for identification. He did not surface until the end of the war.

Legends circulated later about his hiding place. According to one, a famous Prague architect built a partition with his own hands in his huge fin-de-siècle bathroom, behind which Weil could crouch whenever the doorbell rang. Another legend (cited by Philip Roth, who brought *Life With a Star* to the attention of its American publisher) gives the bathroom to Věra Saudková, Kafka's niece. Weil knew Kafka, and may indeed have been hiding with his niece (though, if she is the same person I have in mind, she wasn't entirely safe herself). I have been told that Weil's protector for most of the time was a bona fide worker named Míla Pelc, with whom Weil lived in a small flat in the Prague district of Smíchov, subsisting on whatever food his "widow" Olga was able to scrape together. (Pelc is apparently the model for the brave worker Materna in *Life With a Star*; what some critics saw as a shadow of Socialist Realist influence in an otherwise perfectly nonformulaic novel may have been only a reflection of experience.)

The freedom that the silence of guns brought to Weil during World War II was not without its dangers. The Party has a long memory, and quite a few people disappeared as soon as Red tanks, followed by KGB jeeps, entered the Czech capital. (Some reappeared ten years later, when Khrushchev dismantled the Gulag; some disappeared forever.) Weil had failed to gain readmission to the Party, but he did gain membership in the Writers Union. And somehow the vigilantes from the KGB forgot about him—perhaps some old pals, who in the meantime had become influential political big shots, protected him—and so he wrote a novel. Not *The Wooden Spoon* (which was completed before the war and which he did not dare to submit after the war because it was a sequel to *From Moscow to the Border*, and quite possibly the first fiction about the Gulag) but *Life With a Star*, which was certainly the first important work of Czech fiction to come out of the war.

Life With a Star, this translucent cup of human suffering, would have been a landmark book if the timing had not been so bad. It came out only a year after the putsch of 1948. Socialist Realism of the crudest variety had just become the literary law of the land. The first odes to tractors, the first dramas based on the wholly fictitious conflict of the Good with the Even Better, began to flood the culture. Weil's book met with the absolute rejection of the Party, and eventually it was banned: it was "existentialist" and "decadent," a call to passivity and political inactivity. The book cost Weil his membership in the Writers Union, and earned him verdicts like "cosmopolitan formalist . . . Trotskyite-Bukharinist enemy, a nihilist."

The Party had simply never forgiven Weil for prematurely telling the truth about Stalinism. Even as recently as 1985, the authoritative dictionary *Czech Writers of the Twentieth Century* had this to say about *From Moscow to the Border*:

> The atmosphere of Moscow of the mid-'30s is rendered from the enemy's point of view and, as J. Fučik demonstrated in his review "Kitschy Trash about Moscow," the novel is artistically weak and lacks great ideas. At the time of growing fascist threat, the novel's influence was pernicious and Marxist literary critics resolutely rejected the work.

Neither *From Moscow to the Border* nor *The Wooden Spoon* was ever published in Czechoslovakia after the war. They were about to appear in 1968, but the tanks appeared more quickly. Nor did Weil himself, who died in 1959, ever see the second edition of *Life With A Star*, which finally appeared in the bookstores in 1964, during a pre-Dubček thaw.

After Khrushchev's secret speech, things got a little better for Weil. In 1957 he published *The Prisoner of Chillon*, a collection of short stories, and he was readmitted, at Jaroslav Seifert's insistence, to the Writers Union. (He had been expelled again for *Life With a Star*.) He put together a beautiful exhibition of children's drawings from the ghetto of Theresienstadt, called *No Butterflies Fly Here*. He even finished another novel, *Mendelssohn Is on the Roof*, but he did not live to see it through the press.

There are some great fictions about the Holocaust, but I know of no novel like *Life With a Star*, in which the nightmare of the Final Solution is captured in such an indirect way, by the renunciation of the hellish effects of gas chambers, torture, and sudden death. It concentrates instead on the condition of anxiety before the step into the unknown and the unspeakable. Several survivors have confirmed my suspicion that this anxiety may have been the worst part of the trip into the deadly night: the time of oscillation between hope forever dying and fear forever living, when nerves cracked, when people bickered about trifles (as Roubíček's aunt and uncle bicker in the novel), when with hysterical exuberance they enjoyed (like Roubíček, the novel's hero and the author's stand-in) a few sunny hours in the cemetery after the last round-up was dispatched and before the next death sentence was given. When the sentence finally was given, some committed suicide, others went to their uncertain fate with toothpaste tubes filled with money, because they believed that money always helps a man.

There are pages in Weil's novel that tell of hope against hope: of certain news from the most reliable sources that the war would be over in two months or three, that people were just being sent off for work. (Didn't the Nazis themselves, after all, insist on retraining courses for Jews?) These are pages uncannily filled with life; for that is how it was. But nothing, in the end, can silence the logical mind: "They tell them it's for work. But they take old people, women and children. If you can't walk, they take you in a wheelchair."

"The living dead," that phrase cheapened by horror stories and horror movies, attains a new meaning here. Standing in a half-empty streetcar, Roubíček overhears a quarrel between two lovers who do not notice his yellow star. The girl insists that the boy marry her because all her classmates are already married. "We don't have an apartment," objects the boy. "I rent a room and you live with your parents." Whereupon the girl, perhaps innocently selfish, certainly insensitive: "There'll be plenty of apartments. Haven't you heard about those transports?" Roubíček is silent.

On another occasion, Roubíček's neighbor approaches him directly, with the obtuseness of a primitive:

> They'll put all of you on ships, and when the ships are out at sea they'll drill holes in them and you'll all drown. That's their plan. I'm sure of it. Franclová told me about it. Her cousin works as a chauffeur for them, so he would know. So I thought we could use that house of yours. My old man could patch it up, cement that crack, and put new tiles on the roof. He loves to do that kind of thing when he gets home from work.

Again, Roubíček is silent.

On another occasion, he encounters another variety of insensitivity, that of a child who, seeing his Star of David, calls to him, "Hello, sheriff!" Eventually Roubíček becomes witness to the attitude of the Nazi superman himself, who

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is to take over a Jewish family's apartment after they are sent away. To him, they are all truly and indifferently dead even if they still go through motions reminiscent of life:

> Pavel entered the room, followed by a man and a woman. They didn't say a word. They didn't look at us; they pretended not to see us at all. I remained sitting at the table, and in my embarrassment I began to stir the tea I had drunk long before. They only looked at the objects in the room. They caressed the furniture, took the pewter mugs in their hands, felt the upholstery of the sofas. They calculated loudly between them the quality and sturdiness of various objects; they discussed how they would move the furniture around. We were already dead. They had come to claim their inheritance. Pavel accompanied them silently into the other rooms and into the kitchen. We could hear their happy voices. They returned to the living room again and went by us. They looked about once more, as if counting all the objects in the room so that not a single one could escape them. We kept sitting with our empty cups. Only when they left did they look at us, but I noticed that they were actually looking at the teacups, spoons, and sugar bowl. Pavel showed them back to the hall. He was there for quite some time. They were probably inspecting the carpet and the armchairs. Then we heard the loud slamming of the door.

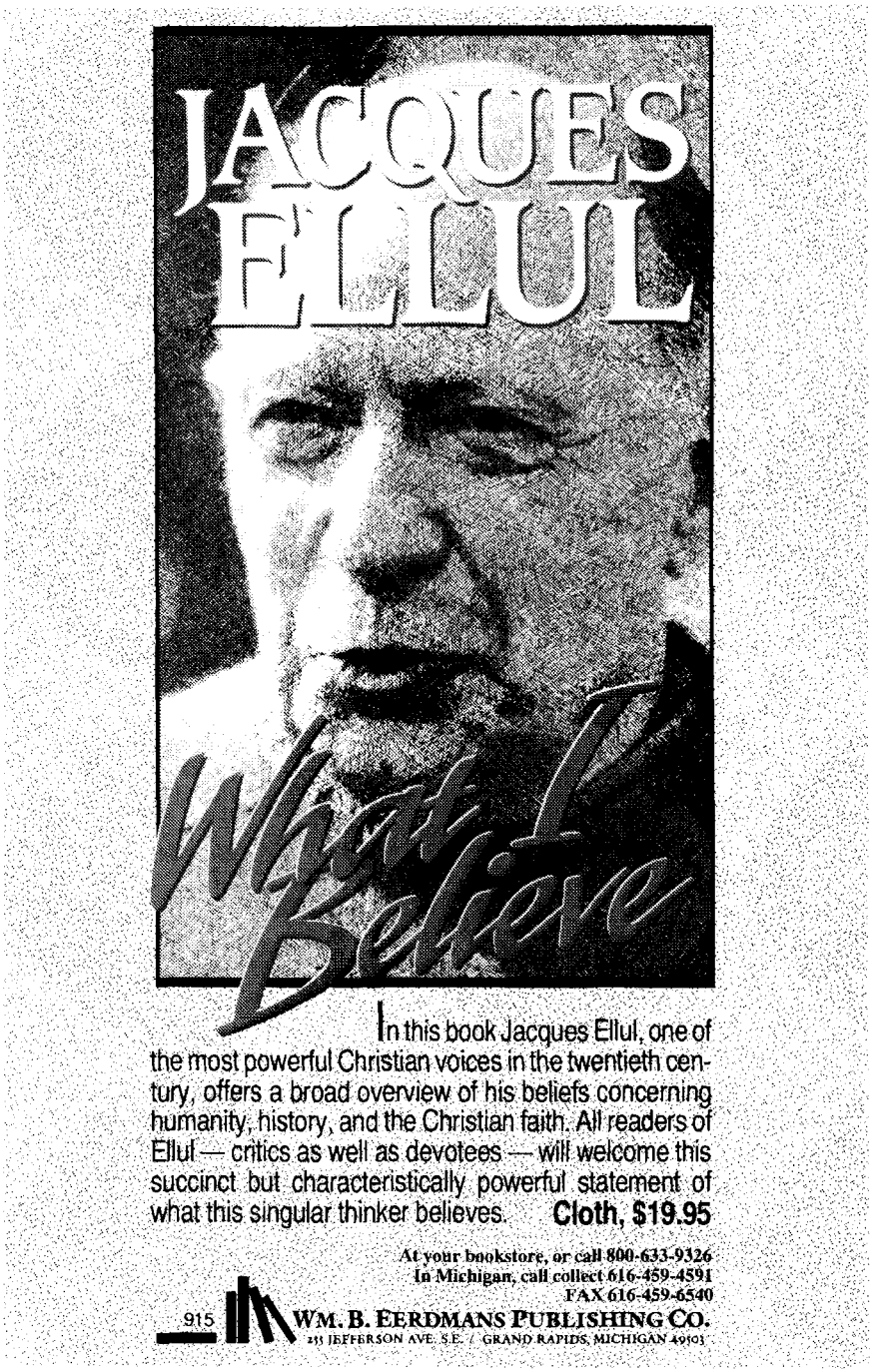
I read this novel for the first time in 1949, and I have never been able to forget this scene.

Did I speak of hope? I meant the pain of uncertainty, that hardly bearable state of mind that contains an ingredient of hope as a brake against resolute action. I have heard people in the West wonder why the wearers of the Star did not rise up against the supermen. The ultimate answer lies in the uncertainty carefully nurtured by the Nazis. Their method was to pit the certainty of death against the hope of life, however dim, however unlikely. "If there were no hope," says Roubíček, "we would probably fight." The validity of these words became clear in the despair of the Warsaw ghetto uprising, which was fought in the hope only of a better death.

Weil knows exactly how to contrast the humaneness that is often born of such extreme conditions with the beastliness that is also born of them. The closest that this deceptively calm story comes to the spectacular tragedies of the concentration camps is in the tale of Robitschek, the Jewish husband who divorced his "Aryan" wife at her insistence, because she hated to have problems. But the divorce was not enough for the woman. Robitschek also had to die, so that there would be no more proof that the lady was ever married to a Jew, so that the blotch on her past would be totally obliterated.

Since Robitschek loves his daughter, he tries to oblige. He fails at his first attempt to poison himself by turning on the kitchen gas, because officials from the Jewish community who have keys to all the Jewish dwellings find him still alive and bring him to the Jewish hospital. So he jumps out of the window. He hurts himself badly, but still fails to die. His wife demands that he be put to death. The doctor objects quietly: "We don't kill people here. We only try to save them." "To save your people!" cries Robitschek's wife. "Who ever heard such nonsense? You'll all go to the devil, including you, you quack, you fraud!" This monster woman is the embodiment of the human perversions of totalitarianism. (She was to appear again later, at the Slansky trials in Prague, as Heda Kovaly and Erazim Kohak have recounted.)

Jiří Weil's extraordinary novel has been lifted from the prison of a small language and brought into English because of Philip Roth's dedication to Jewish writers and to the writers of Eastern Europe, and because American readers and critics have realized that there are foreign writers besides the Latin Americans whose work is worth reading, and because there are editors who still love good books and are prepared to fight for them against the statistics of the market-



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ing directors. It was not always so. In the early 1960s I proposed several Czech novels to editors at Alfred Knopf, later my own publisher, and at the top of my list was *Life With a Star*. I failed in my campaign, as I failed to persuade Angus Cameron that another Czech-Jewish novelist, the delightfully humorous writer Karel Poláček, who perished in Auschwitz, would not be a failure in America, at least not a critical failure.

By the time I met Weil at the Party museum, I don't think he still loved the Party. He did have a soft spot for workers, though not for the working class; and that remained with him until his death. He was one of the few Czech leftist novelists who really knew workers. His affection for them was not a side effect of sentimental leftism: a worker had saved his life. In *Life With a Star*, the episodes involving the worker Materna seem a little blank alongside the richness of detail, of speech, of feeling in the portraits of the non-proletarian Jewish characters, but Materna is most certainly not in the novel to satisfy the demands of Marxist aesthetics. He is in the book because he was in the life. He is a figure of quiet courage.

In 1958 Weil visited the Soviet Union for the last time in his life. "Tell me about Soviet writers," I urged him, when he returned. "What are they like?"

He raised his eyebrows questioningly. "Soviet writers? I don't know any."

"But you just said that you'd had dinner at the Writers Club?"

"I did, but there were no writers there," he said. "You know, there are no writers in the U.S.S.R. Just members of the Writers Union."

Those may have been the last words I heard from him. Shortly afterward he was admitted to the hospital, where leukemia quickly killed him.

JOSEF ŠKVORECKÝ's most recent book is *Sins for Father* (W. W. Norton).

Field of Dreams

BY MARTIN PERETZ

From Beirut to Jerusalem by Thomas L. Friedman

(Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 525 pp., $22.95)

Thomas Friedman's account of his journey as a reporter from Beirut to Jerusalem is rich in precisely the qualities that made his dispatches from those two capitals so memorable, and so heartbreaking. We have to go back to David Halberstam, and perhaps to Homer Bigart, for another American foreign correspondent so unerringly alert to the illuminating detail. Most of Friedman's colleagues cover the area as a police brutality story, as a morality play with victims and victimizers, or as a tale of insufficient diplomatic pressure on wanton Israelis. Those are the permissible styles of Middle East reporting. But the historical and psychological complexities of the region are better served by Friedman's vivid, even intimate prose.

Friedman's longtime readers know what those who have depended for their knowledge of the Middle East on other, less initiated journalists do not: that the heavily placarded external walls of this regional house of passions are not its inner courtyard. Friedman penetrates these walls, into spheres that the local inhabitants would prefer to have sealed to outsiders. At its best, Friedman's journalism does what we have come to expect from the rare pieces of genuinely affecting fiction set in the Jewish-Arab vortex; he shows us the distinctive intensity and the distinctive abandon by which those people live.

But Friedman's book is fatally lacking in a careful, consistent argument. The closest thing seems to be his recurring insistence on equivalence, his view that Israel and Lebanon are not only in the same neighborhood, but of it. He guides us deftly through two polities with different origins and different destinies, but his retrospective reflections show an appealing and misleading symmetry. Friedman spent the last decade in the Middle East, five years in Beirut, five in Jerusalem; roughly half of his account is given to each of his locales. The very structure of the book bespeaks equivalence; but the equivalence turns out to be more than biographical.

The most compelling portions of Friedman's book are about the torment and the turbulence that is Lebanon. There is a freshness to his chronicle of Beirut that is missing from his Israeli chapters. This can be explained, I suspect, by his combination of physical closeness and psychological distance. Friedman had no personal stake in what he would find in Lebanon. It was not likely to exhilarate him, but neither could it disenchant him. His curiosity led him where it would. He had nothing to prove to himself, or to others, except that he was good at what he was doing. He came with some Arabic, a distinguishing possession (his guild, at least its American membership, puts little value on native tongues).

Naturally he saw most of the pertinent powerful, but Friedman's reports paid extraordinary attention to common folk. In a society as disorderly as Lebanon, the mighty rarely speak with authority. In fact, none of the usual paradigms and models hold in Lebanon. Friedman understood this. He was not tugged to the profound. Sure, beneath the flimsy surface of the Lebanese state, there is a class dimension to the chaos; and there are intersectarian tensions, between clan and clan, and, oh yes, ethnic divisions (as opposed simply to confessional ones), clientalistic structures, foreign intruders, and uneven economic development. But Friedman, giving each of these its due, does not allow such graduate student themes to divert him from the actual plot.

The plot may lack reason, but it has structure. (And its villain, as Friedman clearly shows, is not Israel.) What propels Lebanon, its underlying truth, is the momentum of the feud. The reality of the feud, or more accurately, of the scores of feuds, cries out from Friedman's pages. This is a country where people would be foolhardy to expect to die in their own beds.

Friedman ponders whether he's been to Hobbes's state of nature. It is a pointless conceptual diversion. Where he has been is a place whose political culture includes casual butchery among its norms. At this very moment, for example, the Palestinian relatives of the victims of Sabra and Shatila are in the arms of the forces responsible for their murder. In Friedman's own apartment building, 19 innocent people were blown up in a squabble between PLO bands over the ownership of a flat. Syrians and Maronites, Muslims and other Muslims, are still killing each other. Life is cheap in Beirut, very cheap. Still, in some moving passages, Friedman evokes the redeeming remnants of Lebanese society, those who confirm, against all the suffering, that the old Russian anarchists were right to think that there is a human in-

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stinct of mutual aid. There were many times during the last 15 years when Lebanon displayed the impulse to help and to solace, when many people did not withdraw into sullennesses. And there were once good times in Lebanon, before politics became a continuation of gangsterism by other means. But to leave it at that would be to idealize the past, to ignore what Fouad Ajami has called "the fury that lurked underneath the tranquility and the pretensions."

Friedman chastises the invading Israelis of 1982 for not grasping the Shiites as a factor in the Lebanese future. No doubt the Israeli invasion did awaken and provoke the Shiites (as Friedman notes, the largest group in the country). But the story is a bit more complicated: there was a debate in Israeli intelligence and military circles over whether they should tilt toward the Maronites or toward the Shiites, as if tilting were a self-evidently fruitful enterprise in the first place. They chose the Christians, a fateful, fatal choice. Friedman's insistence that the Israelis failed to recognize the fury of the Shiites might lead you to think that he did grasp it; but he didn't, and in a way he still doesn't.

Immediately following his complaint about the blindness of the Israelis, he betrays nearly the same blindness. "The real Lebanon was two Lebanons," he writes, ". . . Christian and Muslim." Oh, so that's how the country is divided, is it? Friedman seems to think that since the Shiites are Muslims like the Sunnis (and most of the Palestinians), they share the same interests and aspirations. Quite the contrary. It is true that the Shiites have differences with the Maronites, differences they share with the Sunnis; they were certainly not prepared to see the Israelis bolster the faltering sway of Lebanon's Christians. But their deeper quarrels—historical, theological, existential—are with the Sunnis, and especially the Sunni urban elites, who were always ready to carve up dominion over other Lebanese with the Maronites, and who had humiliated the Shiites for centuries. Not one of the Shiite prophets and tribunes makes more than a cameo appearance in Friedman's text.

The Shiites also nursed a grievance against the Palestinians, who had rolled over the Shiite heartland south of Beirut and made it the staging ground for the war of liberation against Israel. Sprinkled through Friedman's book are a few skittish references to that reality, subsumed under the shorthand "Palestinian mini-state," a phrase that pleads for an elucidation that Friedman fails to give it. It was this reality that accounted for the

A Love Poem

by Ayatollah Khomeini

I have become imprisoned, O beloved, by the mole on your lip!
I saw your ailing eyes and became ill through love.
Delivered from self, I beat the drum of "I am the Real!"
Like Hallaj, I became a customer for the top of the gallows.
Heartache for the beloved has thrown so many sparks into my soul
That I have been driven to despair and become the talk of the bazaar.
Open the door of the tavern and let us go there day and night,
For I am sick and tired of the mosque and seminary.
I have torn off the garb of asceticism and hypocrisy,
Putting on the cloak of the tavern-haunting shaykh and becoming aware.
The city preacher has so tormented me with his advice
That I have sought aid from the breath of the wine-drenched profligate.
Leave me alone to remember the idol-temple,
I who have been awakened by the hand of the tavern's idol.

This poem was published, in a facsimile of Khomeini's own hand, in the Iranian newspaper *Kayhan* in Tehran on June 21. Its publication appears to have startled many people even in Iran. According to an accompanying article, it was written by Ayatollah Khomeini two or three months before his death, in honor of the birthday of Muhammad's daughter Fatima, and in reply to a request from the chief of the Air Force. The poem was "issued" by Khomeini's son, Hojatolislam Ahmed Khomeini. Nor is this his only verse; the paper later reported that the committee preparing the full edition of Khomeini's writings is considering also a volume of his poems.

The inquisitor who sentenced a man to death for a novel turns out to have couched his own religious feelings in highly literary, highly profane words.

Love poems, known as ghazals, are an 800-year-old tradition in Persian literature. Some of the early poets may have wished their words to be taken literally, but there is a long history of allegory in the interpretation of these sensual images. (It resembles the history of the interpretation of the *Song of Songs* in the Jewish and Christian traditions.) Thus, the beloved is God, the tavern is the divine presence in which the lover drinks the wine of God's love, the mosque and the preacher are the empty display of outward religiosity, and so on. The sensuality of the poem is perfectly compatible with moralistic and pietistic meanings.

Khomeini's image in the West as a strict legalist and an unalloyed fanatic can hardly account for his authorship of such a poem. But he was one of very few clerics to teach esoteric subjects, and was known to write "gnostic" (*'erfani*) poems like this one. Khomeini is said to have been reprimanded in middle age for his mystical inclinations; most of his fellow clerics were suspicious of such tendencies, which threaten to burst the bounds of religious law and convention.

Mystics were often viewed as close to heretics—mystics like al-Hallaj, reverentially referred to in Khomeini's poem, who was savagely executed in 922 A.D. He was said by his followers to have passed beyond his self and merged with God; his famous utterance "*Ana 'l-Haqq*" ("I am the Real" in the translation above, "I am Truth" and even "I am God" in other translations) scandalized orthodox Muslims, and even some Sufi mystics, for many centuries. "His teaching about human nature and divine love was subtle as well as poetic," wrote Marshall Hodgson about this hero of Khomeini's, "but it was, above all, rash."

WILLIAM CHITTICK AND
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rice-and-flowers reception accorded the Israelis by the Shiites of the south in the early summer of 1982. (Friedman tells us that even West Beirut Muslims, presumably including Sunnis, "welcomed the Christian-led Lebanese army when it came in and replaced the PLO." But why? What did this say about Palestinian rule?) Doubtless the memory of the "Palestinian mini-state" is also what lies behind the on-again, off-again war of the camps waged between Amal, the mainstream Shiite militia (also unmentioned), and the various winglets of the PLO.

Friedman says of his colleagues what he might have said of himself, that "the overfocusing by reporters on the PLO and its perception of events led them to ignore the Lebanese Shiites and their simmering wrath at the Palestinians for turning their villages in south Lebanon into battlefields." Overfocusing, indeed: Friedman tells us a bit about what the PLO mini-state in Lebanon did to the PLO, but unrevealingly little about what it did to the Lebanese. It was not something he wrote about at all prior to 1982. Even now, his generally tough prose weakens when he writes about the Palestinians.

With almost all the other Western journalists then resident in Lebanon, Friedman shares the common coyness about the one concrete example anybody has ever experienced of direct PLO rule. Still, in some devastating passages, he settles once and for all the debate over whether the Western media in Lebanon flacked for the PLO. Friedman, who won many confidence-building battle stripes for having displeased the Israelis, describes how Arafat and his legions met "a huge generally uncritical international press corps, many of whose members identified with the PLO as underdogs and '60s-style revolutionaries."

In Beirut each faction had its own territory, its own enforcers, its own version of reality. Friedman recalls that rarely could a reporter have the satisfaction of feeling that he had really got to the bottom of something. Some simply improvised. However they coped, it was in an atmosphere of intimidation. "There was not a single reporter in West Beirut who did not feel intimidated . . . no one had any illusions that [the factions] would tolerate much serious reporting." After fellow *Times*man Bill Farrell told him that Arafat's personal spokesmen complained about the insufficient friendliness of Friedman's filings on the PLO, he "lay awake in my bed the whole night worrying that someone was going to burst in and blow my brains all over the wall." The next day the spokesman told Friedman that he wanted him "to do a little better in the future." It's the kind of suggestion that concentrates the mind.

Friedman implies that intimidation came from all sides, but if any reporters especially feared the Phalange, it didn't show in what they wrote. Rather the opposite: Friedman admits that "the truth is, the Western press coddled the PLO and never judged it with anywhere near the scrutiny that it judged Israeli, Phalangist, or American behavior." Indeed, to enforce a certain minimum discipline all the Palestinians had to do was to manage their leaks efficiently. "For any Beirut-based correspondent, the name of the game was keeping on good terms with the PLO, because without it," Friedman concedes, "you would not get the interview with Arafat you wanted when your foreign editor came to town." That is quite an admission .

Having leveled such serious allegations, however, Friedman suddenly is struck dumb. He names the transgressions, but not the transgressors. This is an odd note of reticence in an outspoken book. It is more proof of the press corps' arrogant insistence that it be treated as some sort of secret fraternity, insulated from outside examination and criticism. Friedman may be the first mainstream journalist to acknowledge what has been obvious about the coverage of the Middle East for years, but he wants to have it both ways; he wants to tell the truth, but not too much of it. He certainly doesn't want to give his comrades reasons to stop thinking of him as a blood brother.

Friedman understands that the pro-PLO, anti-Israel bias is not limited to the reporters on the ground, or at least he understood that as of March 22, 1988. On that day, breakfasting in a London hotel, he noticed that the editors of the *International Herald Tribune* had given its front-page photograph to "an Israeli soldier not beating, not killing, but grabbing a Palestinian" while paying much less attention to genuine atrocities elsewhere, not least in the world of Islam. This was a "lack of proportion" that he would begin to notice in other media. (Perhaps he hadn't noticed in the early days of the war in 1982 how complacently reporters and editors endorsed invented numbers for casualties.)

The feelings of a reporter or an editor about the PLO cannot be isolated from his views about Israel. Friedman draws a distinction between European and American journalists. The European correspondents, he says, need a ruthless Israel in order to "absolve themselves of some of their own guilt" for what happened to the Jews before and during World War II. "Look," Friedman has these correspondents saying, "the Nazis were not unique. . . ." The Americans, he assures his readers, are morally less callous, are not hostile toward Israel in the European manner. Their prejudices are the consequence of something altogether more elevating. Because they hope that Israel "will one day fulfill its promise," against which they indefatigably measure it, American correspondents "seem to relish Israel's misdeeds."

Friedman argues that these reporters' (and other Americans') "identification with the dreams of biblical Israel and mythic Jerusalem run so deep . . . that when Israel succeeds and lives up to its prophetic expectations . . . [it] is their success" too. (He adduces Woody Allen as an authority on the "death" of the Israeli "dream"!) He follows this explanation with a random romp through the historiography of biblical symbolism in America, from the Puritans to Martin Luther King. This is all too profound. The American press corps is not made up of unrequited lovers of Zion. But Friedman himself is a perfect illustration of the idealistic goofiness that he wrongly imputes to his colleagues.

From Beirut to Jerusalem is a personal melodrama. Its author portrays himself as a crushed Jewish romantic. For his high school years were "one big celebration of Israel's victory in the Six-Day War. . . . I was insufferable." The appraisal seems fair. Friedman's portrait of himself as a young Zionist might have been the work of a Philip Roth imitator. Friedman even provides the confession that since the age of 15 he had "never really been interested in anything else" but Israel (and, he now tactfully adds, the Middle East). If that is true, he should have disqualified himself from his beat.

His Zionist bewitchments, certainly, didn't prevent him from telling the Arab side of the story. He bent over backward to be fair to the PLO. We have his own testimony that he, like his colleagues, coddled the PLO. Nor did his Zionism prevent him from giving the Israeli side. What cannot be denied, though, is that he deals with his own people—and they are, without embarrassment, his own people—far more harshly than he does with their enemies. Menachem Begin doesn't come off anywhere as well in this book as does Yasir Arafat, who is a "teflon guerrilla," and later on the "gipper," and later like a rock star. This, again, is the logic of equivalence: Israel is lowered a bit, its enemies are raised some, and they meet in the same ugly place.

Friedman won a Pulitzer Prize for his reconstruction of the Sabra and Shatila massacre. (He shared the prize with Loren Jenkins of the *Washington Post*,

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whose version of the events was rather different.) He was psychologically enmeshed in his story. "One part of me wanted to nail Begin and Sharon—to prove, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that their army had been involved in a massacre in Beirut in the hope that this would help get rid of them. . . . Yet, another part of me was looking for alibis—something that would prove Begin and Sharon innocent, something that would prove the Israelis couldn't have known what was happening." By the time he interviewed the Israeli commander in Lebanon, Gen. Amir Drori, Friedman was beside himself with rage:

> I banged the table with my fist and shouted at Drori, How could you do this? How could you not see? How could you not know? But what I was really saying, in a very selfish way, was "How could you do this to *me*, you bastards? I always thought you were different. I always thought *we* were different. I'm the only Jew in West Beirut. What do I tell people now? What do I tell myself?"

The next morning a still petulant Friedman "buried Amir Drori on the front page of the *New York Times*, and along with him every illusion I ever held about the Jewish state."

General Drori deserved punishment. But is it fair that Israel was hostage, during all his years in the Middle East and in his book, to Friedman's illusions? Friedman thinks that his passions "made me a better reporter." He makes no bones about what these were. As a boy Israel made him proud, stiffened his spine, filled him with a tribal feeling. Like most tribalists, he thought his tribe was perfect. It wasn't until he went to Israel in the 1980s, he says in a startling confession of naïveté and ignorance, that he "discovers that it isn't the Jewish summer camp of his youth." This discovery simply busted his Zionist heart. I was myself a passionate child Zionist, too, but I knew very few others whose Israel was so unrealistic, so unerring, so unflawed, as Friedman's. Those I did know grew up.

When Israel failed Friedman, in short, Israel failed. Now, there is something attractive about the position of the critic; but Friedman is not professionally a critic, he is professionally a reporter. And the silly standard by which he measures Israel should not be held up to any society. He certainly does not hold the standard up to Arab societies. In fact, he seems to hold Arab societies to no standard at all.

Friedman's expectations of Israel are justified, he seems to believe, by his Jewishness. His book includes some meditations about a religious vision for the Jew-

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The "New" PLO

Or: Can the Leopard Change its Spots?

After more than 20 years of ostracism by most of the civilized world, Yasir Arafat, Chairman of the PLO, has finally uttered the "magic words" demanded by the U.S. It didn't come easy, and he didn't get it quite right. But it was good enough for Secretary of State George Schultz who, "the words" having been spoken, declared the willingness of the U.S. to talk with the PLO. One wonders whether that surprising opening will bring peace in the Middle East any closer to realization.

What are the facts?

■ Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, having wrung major concessions from Israel, promised that the U.S. would not deal with the PLO unless it fulfilled two conditions: (1) it would accept U.N. Resolutions 242 and 238; (2) it would recognize Israel's "existence". Congress added a third condition, namely that the PLO would renounce terrorism. Finally, after 20 years of obdurate resistance, Yasir Arafat, as spokesman for the PLO, did make those statements. Secretary Schultz decided therefore that the U.S. must establish contact with the PLO. Only a week earlier, the Secretary had refused Arafat a visa to enter the United States, because of his personal association with and personal responsibility for widespread terrorism all over the world.

■ What are the goals of the PLO, and is it likely that they have changed by the uttering of those three sentences? The PLO is a terror organization, created in 1964 by the Arab League. It has only one aim: the destruction of the State of Israel through force and violence. Any apparent deviation from this single-minded aim is a temporary tactical maneuver.

■ The basic charter of the PLO is the so-called "Palestinian National Covenant." Its main theme is that the State of Israel has no right whatever to exist. It states clearly that "Palestine...is an indivisible part of the Arab homeland," and that "the Arab-Palestinian people...reject all solutions that substitute for the total liberation of Palestine." Those PLO and Arab leaders who have from time to time ventured to propose a less inflexible approach have invariably paid with their lives for such deviation from PLO "orthodoxy".

■ The recent unilateral declaration by the PLO of a "Palestinian State with its capital in Jerusalem" on territory administered by and under control of Israel is an attempted step in that direction. The PLO was founded long before Israeli administration of Judea-Samaria (the "West Bank") and the Gaza Strip. Its avowed purpose was then, has always been and continues to be, not the establishment of a Palestinian state, but the destruction of Israel proper.

■ The PLO is the kingpin of international terror. It maintains a complex network of relations with all of the main terror organizations throughout the world. It has written a blood-spattered record of unrelenting terror. Some of their more "glorious" exploits: the mid-air explosion of a Swissair jetliner (47 dead); the attack on pilgrims and passengers at Ben-Gurion International Airport (26 dead, 76 wounded); the attack on Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics (11 dead); attack on the Ma'alot school (24 dead, 62 wounded—mostly children); the hi-jacking of a passenger bus on the Haifa-Tel Aviv highway (35 dead, 80 wounded); the coordinated shoot-outs at the Rome and Vienna Airports (16 dead); and the murderous attack on the Istanbul Synagogue, in which 21 worshippers were killed.

■ In their attacks against Americans, the PLO hand is suspected in many of the kidnappings of U.S. hostages. American citizen Leon Klinghoffer was brutally killed in the PLO ship-jacking of the *Achille Lauro*. Some of the most brutal PLO attacks against Americans have been against U.S. diplomats. In the Sudan, in 1973, two American diplomats, Ambassador Cleo Noel and Chargé d'Affaires George C. Moore, were mercilessly machine gunned to death when blackmail demands were not met. *The Washington Post* reported on reliable evidence that Yasir Arafat personally was in charge of these executions. In 1976, Ambassador Francis Meloy, Jr. and Counselor Robert Waring were assassinated in Beirut, an attack widely believed to have been the work of the PFLP, a faction of the PLO. In March of 1988, a bomb-laden car was placed in front of the Hilton Hotel in Jerusalem in an attempt to assassinate Secretary George Shultz. There have been many bombings, hi-jackings, and terrorist attacks in virtually every Mid-East and European country, leaving countless dead and wounded. While the final verdict is not yet in, it is generally assumed by our government and by those who are investigating this terrible crime that one of the Palestinian factions patterned after and instructed by the PLO is responsible for the bombing of Pan Am flight #103, which cost over 270 mostly American lives.

Can the leopard change its spots? It does not seem likely. And it does not seem likely that the PLO, engaged in unrelenting terror since its creation 24 years ago, could suddenly become a factor for peace, just because of the intonation of a few "magic phrases". It is comforting to think that peace in the Middle East can be achieved by bestowing respectability on the PLO. But the only way to bring about peace in the Middle East is by direct negotiations between Israel and representatives of the residents of the administered territories, as agreed in the Camp David Accord: a period of autonomy, after which the final disposition and status of the territories will be decided by the people involved. The PLO cannot be a party to the peace process, because its charter calls for war and destruction and because terror and peace cannot exist together.

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ish state, a dense and dangerous subject about which he appears to know little. More concretely, he writes that "what the West expected from the Jews of the past, it expects from Israel today." He may be right, but not quite in the way he intends. For what the West expected from the Jews of the past was that they be docile and cowardly and craven. For many centuries in many places the Jews fulfilled those expectations. Zionism was meant to put an end to such fulfillments, and to propose others. The Hebrew poet Uri Zvi Greenberg asks, "Where are there instances of catastrophe / like this that we have suffered at their hands? / There are none—no other instances. / This is the horrifying phrase: no other instances." Given this history, it is grotesque to invoke the West's expectation of the Jews as a standard for their state. But Friedman turns the screw still one more time. "After all the centuries of being lectured by the Jews," he says, the West finally wants to see whether these same Jews will live up not only "to the standards they set for themselves," but whether they will also live up to the standards they set "for others." What exactly does Friedman think the Jews expected from Christian Europe? They certainly didn't expect justice or safety; and, alas, they were right.

The standing norm in the Middle East, Friedman tells us, is what he calls "Hama rules," the pitiless pursuit of political ends through bloodshed. Hama was a Syrian town of some 180,000 inhabitants, mostly Sunnis under the sway of the rebellious Muslim Brethren. It's not altogether clear what happened in Hama in February 1982. We do know that Hafez Assad, a member of the small Alawite minority, determined to create a wasteland. A conservative estimate of the number of dead is 20,000. (Assad's brother Rifat, who was in charge of the operation, boasts that the figure was nearly double that.) In part owing to Friedman's writings, Hama has become a metaphor for the brutal modalities of the Arab world. Hama rules have governed in Lebanon for 15 years, as they govern in Iraq today, as they governed in Jordan in 1970. (Egypt used poison gas against other Arabs in the early 1970s.)

Does Israel play by Hama rules? Friedman, who faults others for what he politely calls a "lack of proportion" about Israel, seems a bit uncertain. He says that he is "convinced that there is only one man in Israel Hafez Assad ever feared and that is Ariel Sharon, because Assad knew that Sharon, too, was ready to play by Hama rules." Is only Sharon, then, the dark mirror image of Assad? No, the equivalences run deep. Elsewhere he writes that Israel "had talked about 'purity of arms' to itself, but in the real world had learned to play by Hama rules, just like everyone else in the neighborhood." Just like everyone else? This is the kind of moral parallelism that persuades writers of their daring. On "Nightline" a few weeks ago, discussing the abduction of Sheik Obeid and the hanging of Colonel Higgins, Friedman characteristically remarked that "it's the Middle Eastern way. The Israelis know that, the Hezbollah know that. The problem is, the Hezbollah are much better at the game than the Israelis, because they do it without any guilty conscience. . . . Both sides have really used Higgins in this case, and exploited him in a very tragic way." Never mind that the Israelis did not exploit poor Higgins, that his fate backfired on them and brought them under fire.

Suggesting that Israel's conduct is equivalent to Syria's and Iraq's is like saying that American conduct during World War II was equivalent to the conduct of the Nazis. What Friedman has done is to mistake similarities (and not many similarities) for essences. In some passages he shows that he himself knows better, as in his shrewd and textured analysis of the gangster regimes of Hafez Assad and Saddam Hussein and their routinization of Hama rules. But we are left with his crude refrain of equivalence. (Close readers will note that, though he decisively and explicitly includes Israel under the Hama rules, he absolves a handful of Muslim countries because their practice is based on "the more gentle Ottoman authoritarian tradition," not the "more brutal, un-Islamic" kind. Qaddafi's Libya? Khomeini's Iran?)

Friedman is so overwrought about the defects of Israeli society that he can't seem to distinguish between the reality of Hama rules and the reality of his disappointments. Everything is put through the wringer of his childhood dreams: not only the liberties Israeli security forces take with prisoners and procedures, or the sangfroid with which young Israeli soldiers loose bullets on young Palestinians hurling rocks and Molotov cocktails, but also Israel's obsession with the Holocaust (as if Friedman is himself immune to the mawkish), the ambivalence about settlements, the hold on the political system of the minority of the ultra-Orthodox, the hypocrisies of official spokesmen. Some of his worries have a basis in fact. But what, exactly, is he worrying about? The Israel along the sea or the Israel in his fantasy?

Surely the fundamental contrast between Israel and the Arab states lies in the accountability of government to the governed. The long impasse in Israeli politics notwithstanding, such accountability is axiomatic in the Jewish state. Leadership stands or falls in response to the sometimes messy, but finally ordered, tally of the public will. Proof of such accountability runs like a thread through all of Israel's history: in the Kahan Commission, for example, established by Menachem Begin after vast public and parliamentary protests to investigate Israeli involvement in the Sabra and Shatila massacre. Friedman is oddly cavalier about it: "An investigation which results in such 'punishments' is not an investigation that can be taken seriously." He fails to see that a whole society was insisting that its government make a reckoning of its role in a moral calamity. (Only a few weeks ago the Israeli Supreme Court ruled that the Israeli army cannot destroy the homes of Palestinians accused of wrongdoing until

An Old Joke: Christ and the Woman Take in Adultery

She'd been clubbed to her knees when Christ
pushed roughly through the crowd, which had,
in blood lust, rushed so close to her
their stones were hitting one another.
And Christ stood over her and shouted,
Let him without sin cast the next damn stone.
The crowd, paused, thinking. Then out of nowhere,
out of the shuffling, silenced crowd
whizzed one damn stone. It hit—bullseye!
The woman swayed on her knees, fell
at Christ's feet. He stared at her, amazed.
And in the joke I started out to tell,
Christ looks into the crowd and howls,
Goddammit, Mother—that's not funny!

But I see now that Christ was wrong.
It wasn't she, not Mary. It was the man
who still had love's scent on his flesh,
love's scent on his hands, as he chose
one stone, weighed it, thought twice, three times,
then threw—and baffled Christ, who thought
it was his perfect mother correcting him.

ANDREW HUDGINS

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they have appealed through the military courts. This, in the middle of a hostile uprising!)

There is a struggle, to be sure, being waged in Israel over the values and purposes by which the society will ultimately be defined. But Friedman seems cynical about that struggle, too. He believes, for example, that on the major question of the day, on the question of the occupied territories, the parties are united, that "differences between Labor and Likud over the West Bank were quite insignificant. The only difference between them was in rhetoric."

But no such differences and no such accountability can be attributed to any Arab system of government. Arab political life does not include public apologies and public explanations. Around the world we are now in an era of great democratic expectations. Only a few months ago people of goodwill everywhere were stunned by the bloodletting in Tiananmen Square, but such an event wouldn't raise an eyebrow in the Arab orbit, and probably didn't. (According to *People's Daily*, the Chinese Communist newspaper, Arafat wrote Jiang Zemin, the new secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, "to express our extreme gratification that the friendly People's China has restored normal order after the recent incidents.")

Friedman is dead to a good deal of Israeli life. For example, to the Israeli army. Given the fact that Israel has not, in its entire existence, had a single day of peace (even when there were no occupied territories), it shouldn't shock that the army permeates the entire society. This is, almost in the old-fashioned sense, a nation at arms. But it is a little shocking that Friedman deals with the army mostly with anecdotes about a few of its boorish and brutish soldiers, with stick figures used as symbols to suit his purposes. Surely what is remarkable about this central institution in Israeli life is that it has never posed a peril to democratic norms or practices. At the same time, civilian authority has generally respected the professional independence of the military. Under the present government, for example, the army has been able to maintain its policy of restrained response to the *intifada*, despite continuous outcries from many of the Likud's hard-core constituents. Yes, there have been crimes and abuses (some of them corrected by the army, some of them corrected by the courts, some of them uncorrected). But the top brass are doves, who see only a political, not a military, solution to the problem of a nationalist uprising. Some famous military controversialists notwithstanding, this army never allows itself the quick fix of mass killings. There are army norms that constrain the range of what is militarily permissible. Is there an army that does better?

From Friedman's book you learn much about Lebanon but little about Israel. How *does* he want Israel to live in its brutal neighborhood? He rehearses the grim prognostications of others without taking them seriously, recoils from realpolitik, lectures about Hama rules, and is silent. Instead he invests the United States with chimerical powers to bring peace. He seems to believe that the Arab-Israeli conflict is hospitable to American-style deal-making. Thus, in a foolish passage, Friedman laments the loss to history that Robert Strauss, President Carter's envoy to the region, "did not stay in his job long enough to see it through." (Friedman has a weakness for homespun wisdom, and was impressed by Strauss's comment on the West Bank: "I don't know why any one of them would want it and why the other would even give a damn.") No doubt he has been confirmed in this faith by James Baker, the pol par excellence, who is Friedman's current beat.

Thomas Friedman doesn't even hint at alternatives to policies he criticizes. This makes his criticisms seem both abstract and a little irresponsible. Up to the day before yesterday, almost all of Israel's neighbors denied its right to exist. Now there is a cold peace with Egypt, and parts of the PLO have been coaxed and cajoled into at least a ritualized formula of acceptance. But other countries and other Palestinian elements maintain the hard line. Weapons flow to the region like rivers to the sea, weapons of mass destruction, chemical and biological weapons. It is true that Israel is a major military power, but with reason: even in the best of circumstances, Israel will live not only in physical danger, but in moral ambiguity. Statecraft, after all, is not the road to sainthood. But security and survival are also moral ends; and if realpolitik is required for them, then it, too, is a moral thing.

London Forms

BY WILLIAM PRITCHARD

First Light by Peter Ackroyd

(Grove Press, 328 pp., $19.95)

At the conclusion of *Notes for a New Culture* (1976), Peter Ackroyd's sharp, polemical essay on modernism, he noted how little "theoretical life" there was to be found in present-day England. Unlike the excitements of European modernism, English creative writing "has revealed no formal sense of itself and continues no substantial language." Instead, Ackroyd claimed, English writing is enslaved to false notions of "subjectivity" and "realism," and is too timid and complacent to explore what he called, rather dauntingly, "the problems and ambiguities of a formal absoluteness."

Ackroyd proceeded to publish two books about modernist heroes: a short account of Pound and a full-scale life of Eliot. As a "creative writer," he produced five novels during the 1980s devoted to precisely the exploration he found so rare in contemporary English writing. Of these novels, the latest and longest is *First Light*. It is a performance of much skill and ingenuity. Whether it should be admired for demonstrating Ackroyd's implicit claim that at least his own work reveals a "formal sense" of itself, or a "substantial" language, is another matter.

Each of Ackroyd's fictions announces itself as playfully at odds with traditional realistic narrative. Each refuses to put forth a central, reliable narrative voice that stands up and delivers judgments about life, that is firmly anchored in a particular historical time. (If there is such a voice, as in *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*, it is the voice of a ruined man.) Voices shift and times change; each narrative, at least in part, is about other, previous narratives and historical events. (The fashionable word for this is "intertextuality.")

Ackroyd's first and slightest effort, *The Great Fire of London* (1982), contains not only an attempt to make a film of Dickens's *Little Dorrit*, but a character who is convinced, in moments of paranoia, that she *is* Little Dorrit. And the fire that concludes the book by burning down the film set is a replay of the original Great

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Fire of 1666 as well as, in the minds of surviving Londoners, a prophecy of more terrible things to come. In *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (1983), Ackroyd produced his most seamless and readable book, an elegant narrative that purports to be a journal Wilde kept during the final weeks of his life. As created by Ackroyd, Wilde's voice has its Oscar-like jewels: "I went from poetry to prose, and then to drama. After that I went to prison." Yet by the novel's end that voice has taken on genuine gravity and poignancy. In the *Testament*, as in all his creative work, Ackroyd aims at inclusiveness—a mix of tones and genres from tragedy to comedy, high lyric to low satire. (Ackroyd's interest in mixed modes of being has also found expression in *Dressing Up* [1979], a book about transvestism and drag.)

Hawksmoor (1985) and *Chatterton* (1987) go further in their elaboration of creative fantasies. The former looks at first like a historical novel, but subverts things by replacing the real architect Nicholas Hawksmoor, assistant to Christopher Wren, with one Nicholas Dyer, who not only designs churches but is a Satanist plotter against, among other things, the Royal Society. Meanwhile, the character named Hawksmoor is a 20th-century London detective investigating a series of murders that occur near Dyer's churches.

In *Chatterton*, a modern poetaster called Charles Wychwood becomes convinced that Thomas Chatterton not only forged the "medieval" poems with which his name is associated, but also forged his own death and lived on to write much of Blake's and other 19th-century poets' works. Chatterton himself (as it were) enters the narrative in the 18th-century "historical" language that Ackroyd employed previously in *Hawksmoor*. Like its predecessor, *Chatterton* is a novel full of surprises, and even when a reader is less than continuously delighted by them (*Hawksmoor* provided, for me, a surfeit), there is no denying that a resourceful and unrelenting inventiveness is at work.

In all of these books London is very much stage center, in its contemporary and its historical guises. For some years Ackroyd was literary editor of the *Spectator*, and one has the sense that a learned familiarity with streets, pubs, and especially architecture give solidity to the novels, anchoring their fantasy to sensible shapes and forms, real alleys and churches, the smells and shades of all sorts of furnished rooms.

His new novel, *First Light*, features a large cast of characters, and touches on London only briefly. Its action takes place at the point where Dorset and Devon meet, near Lyme Regis, at a spot called Pilgrin Valley where an archaeologist named Mark Clare and his company of assistants are excavating a presumably neolithic grave. Other characters who take their turns occupying the narrative center include an extravagantly bitchy lady from the Department of Environment, Evangeline Tupper, down from London to oversee things; a retired entertainer named Joey Hanover who is looking for the secret of his birth, which he believes occurred in Pilgrin Valley; a weird father-and-son team, Farmer and Boy Mint ("Mint and Mint. As hard as flint") who regard the excavatory proceeding with hostility; an astronomer, Damian Fall, full of brooding on the night sky and the meaning of it all; an antiques dealer, Augustus Fraicheur, who provides a point of gossip for communal and other goings-on.

The novel is divided into six parts, each with an epigraph from writers who have, so to speak, been there before Ackroyd: Blake, Hardy, Wilde, J. G. Frazer. The six parts contain, in all, 80 chapters, most of them quite short, each with a descriptive title (the first and final chapters are titled "The Uncertainty Principle"). It is an extremely shaped though leisurely narrative, with changing but clearly focused centers of consciousness, the action of which spans a few months. Although periodically one of the characters steps back from the ongoing sequence of temporal events to deliver a timeless "story"—some folktale or remnant of the past that has been startled into memory by an occurrence—these moments are clearly signaled. Overall the narrative offers readers a security this writer was at pains to deny them in *Hawksmoor* and *Chatterton*. In that sense the book is old-fashioned, at odds with the modernist pitch Ackroyd made before he began to write novels.

Still, Ackroyd again pushes things off-center, not merely by constantly displacing his characters with one another, but by denying us a consistent tone of voice or prevailing style through which the novel can be integrated. At times, as when the Mints—father and son—are introduced, the narrative voice is familiar, sophisticated, and satiric, full of urbane amusement at these unlikely creatures:

> [Farmer Mint] was wearing an old flat cap but nothing could disguise the amount of hair which seemed to be sprouting from all over his face and head—hair struggling to emerge from beneath the cap, hair pouring in torrents from his neck, hair writhing out of his ears, hair climbing from his eyebrows to his forehead. In contrast Boy Mint was almost completely hairless, and there was a suspicion that beneath his own flat cap he might in fact be bald; nevertheless he, too, wore blue boots, patched brown trousers, black overcoat and green plastic mackintosh so that together they resembled a pair of large garden gnomes sprung suddenly to life.

In such authoritative passages, of which there are many in *First Light*, the writing is assured, neatly taking the measure of its subject in exactly the right words.

Yet the book's ambitions are not primarily to limit and define and satirize, but to explore matters of ultimate (and intimate) concern. There is much talk about cosmic "origins," much searching—on the part of different characters—for their own origins. The large patterns and metaphors of darkness and light, earth and sky, speech and silence, contribute to the novel's "elemental" feel, while the characters have elemental names like Clare, Fall, Crisp, Chard, Temple, Hill, and Mint. Ackroyd has put in his time with Eliot's *Four Quartets*: that poem of elemental concerns hovers behind a narrative whose two main actions are the penetration deep into the earth and back into time, and the movement out into space and the galaxies. There are playful links made between the constellation Aldebaran and a casket, discovered in the neolithic grave, with the words "Old Barren One" inscribed on it. (The grave is also found to have been astronomically aligned, and the night sky at present is identical to the one of neolithic times.)

Perhaps inevitably, the attempt to put into words a character's sense of vastness—of historical time or astronomical space—issues in a portentous style, especially evident when Damian Fall, the astronomer, is in view:

> And I know that matter itself is a residue, an obstacle in the path of the perfect patterning of the cosmos, a stain upon the face of the original nothingness. Gravity cannot exist without objects; objects cannot exist without gravity; space is inconceivable outside of time, and time itself is only an aspect of space.

At such moments the reader's mind tends to glaze over, like Damian's as he eases himself into the order of things:

> Nothing can happen to me without subtly altering the shape of the visible universe. I too am moving away through limitless space; I am part of that infinite expansion which seems to me to be an infinite horror. Yet I am not my self; I am as evanescent and as shifting as every other part of the cosmos . . .

And so on. In a "key" conversation between Damian and Mark Clare, the novel threatens to gather itself together into wisdom-like formulations that recall the

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"humanism" that Ackroyd, in *Notes for a New Culture*, strongly disavowed. "Science is like fiction, you see," Damian says:

> We make up stories, we sketch out narrative, we try to find some pattern beneath events. . . . And we like to go on with the story, we like to advance, we like to make progress. Even though they are stories told in the dark.

Here Damian's notion sounds like the one entertained in Robert Frost's "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep" about how, despite the limitations of human vision, we keep plugging away. As the astronomer puts it, "We go so far out that we can see nothing." But such talk wears out its welcome rather quickly. When Damian tells Mark that "in each generation the heavens become a kind of celestial map of human desires," and then, apologizing, asks, "Am I boring you?" a reader hastens to reply, well, yes.

Such moments of seemingly true confessions about human failure don't match up with the novel's aggressively manipulated plot. The story works itself out through a conflict between the diggers and those forces (led by Father and Boy Mint) that are dedicated to protecting their subterranean heritage. Just as a local performance of Eliot's *Family Reunion* seems, in its awkwardness, to be staged as a comedy ("That's good. I like a nice cry," says Joey Hanover cleverly), so the novel's resolution is staged with a mixture of intent seriousness and knockabout farce that keeps us off balance, away from any fixed point of view. The Uncertainty Principle of the book's opening and closing chapter titles is in fact a comic principle—as Joey, the old actor, reminds us: "Tragedy in the past, mystery in the future, but comedy in the present."

One of the pleasing aspects of *First Light*, of Ackroyd's fiction generally, is the way it not only acknowledges but is infused by dead writers. Hardy, for example, is present in various ways besides the Dorset-Devon locale. Ackroyd alludes in epigraphs to Hardy's *Two on a Tower*, and he has also appropriated the tower for his own purposes. *Two on a Tower* has an astronomer-hero named Swithin St. Cleve; in *First Light* the tower is called Swithin's Column, and plays a role when Mark Clare's wife leaps to her death from its top. The danger of such opportunistic exploitation is a certain factitiousness, and there are moments when the new book feels too clever, too patently made-up, too knowing about how fictions aren't life, nor words truth, nor the signifier joined unshakably to a signified. But Ackroyd has never been one to deny himself an allusion.

In his mischievous trickiness, he seems closest to two older English contemporaries, Iris Murdoch and John Fowles. Like Murdoch, he delights in ranging over a large cast of characters and subjecting their aspirations to comic and ironic scrutiny. His astute juxtaposing of local habitation and historical ancestors, as well as the "metaphysical" atmosphere, are reminiscent of Fowles's *The Magus* or *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. As is typically the case with both Murdoch and Fowles, it is not clear at the end of Ackroyd's novel exactly how the pieces fit together, how the themes are meant to cohere.

It is clear, however, that he is a writer of highly intelligent entertainments, like his fellow countryman of roughly the same age, A. N. Wilson. Operating under quite different, "realistic" principles of composition, Wilson has created works of notable shape and language. Which merely goes to prove that whatever a novelist does or doesn't believe about modernism is less important than something we already knew from Henry James: "The only obligation to which in advance we may hold a novel, without incurring the accusation of being arbitrary, is that it be interesting."

WILLIAM PRITCHARD teaches English at Amherst College.

CORRESPONDENCE *continued from page 6*

system" in which its players are willing to kill to achieve a market of share? Sure, some hard punitive measures must be taken to regain control of the streets. Yet without making some attempt to account for and change the environment that breeds this problem, the prison door will continue to revolve at a very high price for our society.

RICHARD LETTERI
Athens, Ohio

Louis Mêmе

To the editors:

In the spirit of your Notebook section, please note the following differences on the reaction of the American people toward the guillotining of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette:

"We must not forget that the guillotining of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette was widely cheered by the American people, however much Washington and others were appalled." —"Let Them Eat Hot Dogs" by Henry Fairlie, THE NEW REPUBLIC, July 31

"The execution of the king was, however, a turning point for American public opinion, according to James Madison, then still a supporter of the new regime: 'The sympathy with the fate of Louis has found its way pretty generally into the mass of our citizens, but relating merely to the man, and not to the monarch.' " —*Wall Street Journal*, July 14

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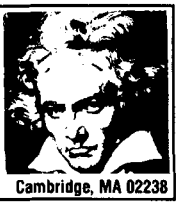

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CAPE COD DIARIST

Comparative Necrology

THERE IS PROBABLY MORE NONsense uttered at commencement ceremonies than in Sunday sermons. I've had one piece of such nonsense ringing in my ears now for months. When I heard it from the mouth of novelist E. L. Doctorow, I couldn't quite believe it. Well, I've now seen it in print, and neither my ears nor my memory deceived me. Addressing graduates of a distinguished university, Doctorow told them that things had never been worse in America. For him, there was no golden age, merely a time when things weren't quite so awful. In outlining his complaint, he started somewhat grounded in reality, moved on to the kind of rhetorical exaggeration perhaps allowable to artistic types at ceremonial occasions, and then shot into outer space. "It used to be enough," Doctorow said, "to brand a critic as a radical or as a leftist to make people turn away. Now we need only to call him a liberal, and pretty soon the word 'moderate' will be the M word. 'Centrist' will be the C word. And only the fascists will be in the mainstream." It was an embarrassment to be on the platform with him, like having to be agreeably polite while some lunatic tells you he's Napoleon. Another honorary degree recipient sitting next to me put his head in his hands in disbelief. What country exactly does Doctorow live in? And why, after hearing such nonsense, did the learned assembly stand and applaud? At the beginning of his speech, Doctorow took up one of the tired clichés of commencement addresses, confessing that he aspires to be one of those poets Shelley described as the unacknowledged legislators of the world. It's actually an authoritarian ambition. I don't mean to put Doctorow exactly in the camp of those who find the United States less morally glamorous than societies governed by a big-bang revolutionary idea. Politically, ideologically, he seemed too unsophisticated for that. But he, too, proved that a calumny against America will still draw cheers.

COMPARATIVE NECROLOGY IS the study of the zeitgeist through the reading of obituaries. We noted a while back in these pages the historical amnesia reflected in the adulation for I. F. Stone, delivered in venues as diverse as the *Wall Street Journal* and "ABC World News Tonight." Since then the philosopher Sidney Hook, another veteran of the ideological wars, has died. His death was barely noticed. Unlike Stone he was not, in our experience at least, a terribly nice man. In recent years he'd periodically send us letters correcting, reproaching, hectoring. We were wrong on this, wrong on that. And often he was right. But he was not only right about small things. He was right on the big things. He was right, for example, early on, about the nature of communism—something that could not be said of Stone even in the dusk of his life. Hook, moreover, was brave. When he organized the independent commission chaired by John Dewey to examine the preposterous but then widely accepted charges of Stalin that Trotsky was a fascist agent, Hook incurred hatred of New York's left intellectual establishment, then in thrall to Moscow. (That hatred endured long after the thrall.) But he was so much more than a political activist. Indeed, Hook probably remains the most important and original interpreter of Marxist thought to have emerged in America. He was also a maverick to the end. Even though his anti-communism drove him into the embrace of extremely conservative intellectuals, it was always on his own terms. Imagine the festering consternation of his Hoover Institution colleagues at his insistence, way into the '80s, that he was still a social democrat. The casual disdain felt in liberal circles for this austere thinker stands in telling contrast to the enthusiasm in these same circles for the *schwärmerei* of I. F. Stone.

PAUL ROBESON JR. IS THE SON of the extraordinary black singer and Communist Party patsy Paul Robeson. The name still has cachet among those who plaintively ask history to "say it ain't so" about Stalinism. So it must have been upsetting to many readers of the *Nation* when the younger Robeson, keeper of his father's flame, wrote the magazine saying, "The scale and systematic nature of Stalin's genocide warrant the comparison of Stalinism with Nazism. Hitler and Stalin were similar in important ways, and Stalinism still nourishes the roots of Russian fascism." What provoked Robeson's letter was a *Nation* column by Alexander Cockburn, noted earlier in this space. Cockburn scrounges among the sources to come up with a minimal estimate of Stalin's victims. Provoked by Robeson Jr.'s charge that his column was "a backhanded defense of Stalinism," Cockburn has now launched a three-page attack on his critics. He patronizes Robeson, calls me an "intellectual crook," and just about labels the historian Robert Conquest a fascist. He is particularly venomous against the Princeton scholar Stephen Cohen and Cohen's wife, Katrina vanden Heuvel, both longtime *Nation* colleagues with their own non-doctrinaire views on the Soviet Union. Maybe he considers them guilty of backsliding, the worst sin to a dogmatic. In any case he ruminates darkly about their intentions, and particularly about Cohen's "agenda," as if they were CIA agents. Cockburn finds especially offensive Cohen's use of the word "we" in discussing the United States. An odd complaint in a magazine called the *Nation*.

ELSEWHERE IN THIS ISSUE (SEE page 34) I discourse a bit on what Thomas Friedman calls the Hama rules (after a notorious massacre): the rules by which Hafez Assad rules Syria and by which Syria tries to rule its neighbors. Now comes one of Syria's present allies—I say "present" only because the Syrians killed his father so I presume he once was *not* an ally—with an even more brutal metaphor for Syrian behavior. The Druze warlord Walid Jumblatt has predicted to a Bahreini newspaper that "Beirut will face the same fate as that of Stalingrad" so long as the Maronite Catholic strongman, Gen. Michel Aoun, remains in the eastern sector of the city. Stalingrad was fiercely bombarded by the Nazis for several months during 1942 and was left a wasteland. "Beirut," said Jumblatt, "will be demolished and leveled to the ground." Jumblatt is right: Assad has no scruples that would keep him from inflicting a Stalingrad on Beirut. What's revealing is that Jumblatt made his assertion without shock or a hint of disapproval. In fact, the day after his interview Jumblatt went to Damascus to pay his respects to President Assad, who has been doing most of the leveling. In the end, of course, Stalingrad turned out to be a disaster for the Nazis. Alas, there's no force that will make Beirut a disaster for the Syrians.

I DON'T HAVE MUCH TO ADD to the controversy over Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs. What is apparent, though, is the exhaustion of the notion of the avant-garde. As recently as the 1960s an artist like Mapplethorpe, and his admirers, wouldn't think to aspire to official imprimatur, let alone to government money. It was for and by people like these that the *salons des refusés* were created in their various historical guises. It's one reason the world of the arts was once so intense and urgent, and now seems so humdrum and routine. Were a daring artist from 19th-century Paris or turn-of-the-century Vienna to come to New York today and ask the location of bohemia, he'd have to be told that it's nowhere. Of course, the National Endowment for the Arts might give him a grant to found a new one.

MARTIN PERETZ

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